Shen Jiu's New Life as a Mother

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Shen Jiu's New Life as a Mother

by special_little_cornflake

Summary

Arson, murder and… motherhood? After succumbing to a qi deviation, the notorious child abuser Shen Qingqiu wakes up in a body of a prostitute. Not only is he weak, female and lacking any cultivation, worst of all, he is required to take care of his new body's child. At least he's read the book, so he knows what's going to come.

Meanwhile, Meng Yao is trying to figure out which powerful cultivator is his father. It's surprisingly difficult.

Chapter 1: Mother!?

Shen Qingqiu died in his sleep.

It was anticlimactic.

He had always thought that he would go out screaming and fighting, the same way he had spent most of his life. Instead, he drowned in the dark depths of his nightmares, the unpleasant tang of blood on his tongue, unable and unwilling to ask for help.

It wasn’t a peaceful end, but it was a quiet one.

He floated in the nothingness for a while, feeling detached and uncaring, resigned to spend eternity this way. Just as he expected, there was no afterlife. Only darkness, deafeningly quiet and empty.

Then he heard a sound. It was high-pitched, rhythmical and extremely annoying. Shen Qingqiu hated it with his whole being.

[Welcome to the System! Due to numerous complaints, your extraction has been cancelled. Rejoice! Unfortunately, your original body is currently unavailable. However, we have found a suitable replacement! Do you accept?]

"What kind of a demon are you?" asked Shen Qingqiu. He had no mouth and no tongue, but somehow he was able to produce words the moment he needed to.

[No demons detected. You can continue your existence in a new world. Do you accept?]

"And what do you want in return?"

[No payment required. All aims have been achieved. The System is required to provide compensation to the victim of unauthorized extraction. An unoccupied body is available. Wish fulfilment required to gain control.]

"What wish?"

[In order to find out, User needs to accept. The offer will expire in one, two, three…]

"Don’t play games with me," his voice was so icy one could stab someone with it.

[The System was aiming to expedite User’s decision making process. According to statistics, with User’s consciousness awake indefinitely, User will accept at some point in the future. Refusing is irrational.]

Some part of Shen Qingqiu wanted to refuse, just to prove he could. But he wanted to live. He had spent all his life fighting for survival, even if this survival was objectively terrible, of course he would take the offer, even if his new body would be that of a worm. Living as a worm was likely not much worse than living as a slave.

"I accept."

[Excellent! We hope that you will have a fulfilling experience!]

He didn't have enough time to answer, as the darkness had swallowed his consciousness whole.

He woke up to the familiar smell of floral incense. He associated this smell with safety, a feeling he rarely got to enjoy. It was soothing even though he knew that this incense was used to mask all the unpleasant smells produced by the main occupation of the establishments of this kind. Shen Qingqiu preferred not to dwell overly much on the ugly reality as it made him sick to his stomach. The smell, however, was as always pleasant and welcome.

A small, soft hand touched his forehead. He could tell it belonged to a woman so he didn't immediately slap it away. Instead, he opened his eyes.

It was indeed a woman. The kind you would expect to see in a brothel. Beautiful enough to be in high demand, she was dressed for work: the neckline of her red silk ruqun[1] was dangerously low and barely covered by a gauzy shawl. Her face was powdered white, but the bright red lip lacquer was smudged. Likewise her hair was still in an elaborate up-do, but several tendrils of hair had come loose. Evidently she had come here immediately after work.

"Your fever finally broke. Don't scare us like that again," said the woman. Her voice was low and pleasant. She was likely a decent singer.

"Fever?" asked Shen Qingqiu, and flinched. His voice grated on his ears, high as a bell and completely alien. Had he become a child?

"You don't remember? You started coughing a few days after that brute threw you outside with no clothes on. We thought it wasn't anything serious, but then you wouldn't wake and your forehead was so hot I was sure you'd die. I asked the Madam to call for the doctor, but you know how she is."

Shen Qingqiu sat up in his bed and looked down at his body, covered by a ratty blanket. Hands small and elegant, with long nails which retained a faint reddish hue from some kind of dye, couldn't belong to a man. Neither could the pair of breasts he could clearly see beneath the blanket.

It was much worse than becoming a child.

He was in a woman's body. And not just any woman's! This body belonged to a prostitute. He had returned back to life only to lose his freedom all over again. And this time he wasn't sure that he would be able to win it back.

"Your lips have gone white again! Don't rush. If you need to lie down, lie down. I'll call for A-Yao. The poor thing has been beside himself with worry this whole time," said the woman and stood up.

As soon as she left, Shen Qingqiu scrambled out of the bed. He stumbled as soon as he was on his feet, unused to his new body. He could tell that he was much shorter than he used to be and he loathed this fact. Just another weakness to account for.

Although the room was small and sparsely furnished, it belonged to a prostitute, so there had to be a mirror somewhere. And, indeed, Shen Qingqiu found a bronze mirror on a small table. As he peered at his own reflection, he noted that his new body didn't look much like him: round faced and big eyed, this woman reminded him of Ning Yingying. He couldn't establish her age, though she seemed to be at least in her twenties.

"Who are you?" he thought while studying his new features.

The annoying voice suddenly returned.

[The donor is Meng Shi, a prostitute from the Hundred Flowers Tower in Yinping. Current status: deceased. Cause of death: fever.]

He noted all the names for future use. The name of the brothel made him scoff at its banality.

[Press "accept" to receive more hints in the future]

Two bright pieces of paper appeared in front of him, and Shen Qingqiu reluctantly touched the one with the word "accept" on it. He couldn't say no to more information.

Before he could do much else, the door opened and a small child walked in, carrying a tray with a bowl of soup. Shen Qingqiu assumed it was one of the servants.

"Mother, you shouldn't be up yet. You were sick for so long! Please, lie down. I can help you eat."

[Attention User! This is Meng Yao, the only son of Meng Shi. Her final wish was for her body's recipient to protect her child and help him become a noble cultivator.]

Mother!?

What kind of sick joke was this? Shen Qingqiu had already been thrown into the body of a sickly mortal woman, who didn't even own her own body, he didn't need a snivelling brat clinging at his robes and calling him mother!

He took several calming breaths. Shen Qingqiu used to be a teacher, he could do it again. This Meng Yao was old enough to take care of himself, so he could teach him cultivation and set the brat on his way. Meng Yao… Why was this name familiar anyway?

[The User must be previously acquainted with the book called Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation.]

That was right. Years ago, he had confiscated a book with scandalous contents from his female disciples. Usually he wouldn't care what they were reading, but their giggling had been profoundly annoying.

The only reason why he finished the book instead of burning it on the spot was the word "cultivation" in the title: he had to check whether it had any actual practices described. It was forbidden to put actual cultivation practices in fiction, because cultivators were stingy with their teachings. It was one of the things Shen Qingqiu fully approved of, because he didn't want some lucky bastard to learn how to cultivate from a stupid book.

He found nothing incriminating, other than a few disturbing erotic scenes. He remembered asking one of the female hall masters to give a talk to all the female disciples about consent and safety. As for the plot of the book, it was surprisingly entertaining, he'd say he enjoyed it, if it weren't for the main character, who was so infuriating he made Shen Qingqiu want to tear his hair out almost every chapter.

Now that the title of the book was pointed out to him, Shen Qingqiu remembered who Meng Yao was. In the book he was mostly known as Jin Guangyao, an antagonist of sorts. A man who rose from the gutter and was shamed and demeaned all his life for his origin, Shen Qingqiu had almost felt bad for him by the end of the story.

"Mother?" asked the child, who was apparently destined to become a Chief Cultivator and die a gruesome death. Worry was written all over his tiny face. The brat didn't even know that his mother was dead. If Shen Qingqiu were a decent person, he would feel guilty about it.

"I don't need any help with eating," said Shen Qingqiu and sat down on the bed. He wasn't particularly hungry, but he wasn't in the habit of refusing food.

The child hesitantly handed him the tray. The broth was pale with a few pieces of vegetables and nothing more. A poor man's fare, but still better than nothing.

"Are you feeling better, Mother?"

"Speaking when you are eating is bad manners. But yes, I do feel better. Now be quiet."

He expected to hate the brat, but something in his eagerness reminded Shen Qingqiu of Ming Fan. Perhaps he could learn to see Meng Yao as a disciple. One of the least annoying ones.

"How are your studies going?" asked Shen Qingqiu after he finished his meal.

"I practice my writing every time I have a spare moment," said the brat.

"Show me."

The brat retrieved a piece of light wood, an old brush and a chipped tea cup filled with water. Shen Qingqiu observed with some curiosity. Despite his destitute origins, he had received his education in a noble household, so he never had to be stingy with paper. This was a clever way to conserve some resources.

The child dipped the brush in water and began to write. Shen Qingqiu immediately recognised the first lines of one of Li Bai's poems. The brat's technique was decent, his characters well-proportioned and harmonious though lacking some of the personality that defined good calligraphy. Shen Qingqiu could work with that.

"Acceptable. What about your physical training?"

Now the brat looked dejected, "I tried some of the meditation techniques from the pamphlet, but I couldn't feel anything."

"Show it to me."

The child took out a thin bamboo scroll from a wooden chest in the corner of the room. As soon as Shen Qingqiu unfolded the scroll, he could tell that its contents were complete garbage. Perhaps the rules of meditation were different, but he couldn't believe that such shitty forms could work in any world.

"If it doesn't work, we will do it my way," said Shen Qingqiu as he crossed his legs. "Sit in front of me and copy my posture."

"Did you find a new cultivation manual?" asked the brat, mirroring his pose perfectly.

"No. Now be quiet and do as I say. Breathe in and out, focusing on this point," Shen Qingqiu poked the spot below the child's navel with two fingers sharply, so the feeling would linger. "This is the center of your breath."

He watched the brat breathe for several cycles, ensuring that he was doing it correctly. Then he continued: "There's energy, called Qi, circulating within you. Imagine it going here", Shen Qingqiu poked him again. "This is your lower dantian. Focus on it."

Unfortunately without his cultivation Shen Qingqiu couldn't check whether the brat was meditating correctly. Having nothing better to do, he joined the child in meditation, trying to gauge whether he'd be able to do any cultivation in this new body. From what he could tell, it was going to be an extremely slow process, but he still had to try. He needed some way to protect himself, especially given his new… position.

They kept meditating until evening, when the woman from before came in and ruined their concentration, "What are you two doing? You've missed dinner."

This time the System provided commentary. Shen Qingqiu noted that other people in the room didn't appear to hear its voice.

[Name: Li Sisi. Occupation: a prostitute from the Hundred Flowers Tower in Yinping. Role: Meng Shi's friend and protector.]

"We were meditating," chirped the boy as he stood up. "It was amazing, Aunt Sisi! I feel like I can run to the river and back a hundred times and not get tired."

"If you're that energetic, you can come help in the kitchen. They'll give you some leftovers if you do."

"I'll bring you something, when I'm done, Mother," said the boy as he left the room. He seemed eager to work. It was a good sign for his future cultivation.

"Did you waste the whole day on this cultivation crap?" asked Sisi. "Teach him practical things. Better yet, let him spend more time in the kitchens. With his origins, he cannot become a scholar, but he could become a cook or a butcher."

"He's meant to be a cultivator. He was born with talent, and I will not allow it to be wasted," said Shen Qingqiu primly. That was one of the reasons Shen Qingqiu sympathised with Jin Guangyao's character: both of them had started to cultivate too late because of the circumstances beyond their control.

"Do you really believe they'll allow that to happen?"

"Who cares whether they allow it or not? He'll be a cultivator either way."

"Always so stubborn! But he's your son, not mine, so I get no say in the way you raise him."

"You don't."

"If you can argue like that, you must be feeling better. How are you feeling?"

"Fine."

"I'm glad. The Madam is eager for you to return to work. Don't show your face to her till you're ready. She'll send you to a client as soon as she sees that you are able to walk."

He hadn't considered the particulars of his new position yet. The thought of having to take a client made him shudder. Shen Qingqiu would have to do something about it.

"This Meng Shi thanks Sisi for her counsel."

"Why so formal all of a sudden? Ah, never mind, I need to go to work. I'll see you in the morning, please try to sleep while you can. You're still too pale."

Shen Qingqiu did feel tired despite his earlier meditation. It was annoying and a clear sign that he had a long way to go if he wanted to return even a whisper of cultivation.

After Sisi left, he went through Meng Shi's things, looking for more information. If somebody grew suspicious of his changed behaviour, it would be extremely inconvenient. He didn't find much: there was a poetry book, extremely old but well cared for, a pearl that he was going to get rid of as soon as possible, and a modest qin.

The brat returned when Shen Qingqiu was playing a simple melody to test the instrument. He was a very polite brat: he didn't interrupt, watching him play quietly until the song was over.

"I've never heard you play this song," said the child.

"It's not suited for the sort of people who come here."

"It's beautiful, Mother."

"I will teach it to you later."

The child’s eyes widened, "But… you said it wasn’t proper for a gentleman to play."

What a strange notion. Playing the qin was one of the Four Arts of the scholar[2]. It was only proper for a young man of good breeding to learn this skill. In fact, Shen Qingqiu remembered that Jin Guangyao knew how to play and used the instrument to kill his sworn brother. He had assumed that he had learned from his mother, but, clearly, she refused to teach him for some reason.

"It’s not proper to play the kind of songs you can hear here, but I’ll teach you other ones."

"Thank you, Mother. This Meng Yao is happy to learn. I brought you something to eat," the boy handed him a baozi. It was barely warm, but still soft. He ate it immediately under the child’s expectant gaze and gave him a curt nod in appreciation when he was done.

"Mother…" started the brat timidly. "May this one sleep here today? Aunt Sisi told me to sleep in the kitchen so I wouldn’t catch your sickness, but now that you’re feeling better…"

Shen Qingqiu opened his mouth to send the child away. There was no world where he would share his bed with a man, even if the man in question was still a child. However, the voice intervened.

[Meng Shi wouldn’t send her child to sleep elsewhere.]

"Yes, you may," said Shen Qingqiu, resigning himself to a sleepless night.

The brat must’ve felt his reluctance because he prepared for bed very slowly and stood there hesitantly for a few moments before sliding under the blanket. Shen Qingqiu turned his back to the brat and sighed.

Despite his expectations, he fell asleep immediately.

His dreams were surprisingly peaceful. It was almost like he was back to his childhood: curled up together with somebody warm and safe.

It was disturbing.

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[1] A common type of traditional Chinese clothing for women. It consists of a top (ru) and a separate skirt (qun). return to text ↩

[2] The four core accomplishments of a learned Chinese scholar-gentleman: Qin (the traditional stringed musical instrument, also known as guqin), Qi (the strategy game of Go), Shu (calligraphy), and Hua (painting). return to text ↩

Chapter 2: The Hundred Flowers Tower.

Seven days had passed since Shen Qingqiu woke up in his new body, and he had yet to leave the room. He had no intention of letting anyone figure out that he was healthy enough to work. He'd rather kill himself than serve some disgusting man. Or, better yet, kill the disgusting man in question. Shen Qingqiu was of the opinion that all clients of brothels were scum who didn't deserve to live. The fact that he used to be one of those clients didn't influence his opinion whatsoever.

Trapped in a single room, his only entertainment was teaching the brat, which wasn't as much of a chore as it could have been. The brat was sharper than most of Shen Qingqiu's former students and far less annoying. Perhaps he should've scouted for disciples in brothels, if they always produced such obedient children.

Though one thing about the brat never failed to unsettle him. Ever since he was young, Shen Qingqiu had trouble falling asleep in male company. It didn't matter if the man was a child, as he had discovered when he was a disciple and had to sleep in the shared quarters. However, he had no trouble sleeping in one bed with Meng Yao. More than that, the only night he couldn't sleep was when Meng Yao came to bed very late after having to run some errands.

It was highly unusual. The only explanation Shen Qingqiu could find was that this body recognised the child as its own. It was a bizarre idea, but he couldn't think of anything better than that.

With each passing day the Madam got more and more frustrated with him. At first, she passed her exceedingly urgent warnings along with Sisi, but on the seventh day she finally came in person.

The cloying smell of her perfume entered the room before she did. Her face was marked with age, though she tried to hide it with heavy make-up. Her clothes were as bright and revealing as any prostitute's, but her hair pins were gold and her bracelet was made of pure jade. She looked at Shen Qingqiu as if he were a speck of dirt under her nail. He hated her immediately.

[Name: Meng Huiling. Occupation: a Madam of the Hundred Flowers Tower. Role: a problematic mother figure.]

"You don't appear ill," said the woman, studying his face as if he were a piece of fruit sold in the market stall.

"I'm still too weak to walk for long."

"I don't need you to walk. You simply have to lie on your back."

"If I faint in the middle of serving a client, it will be bad for our reputation," he said, trying to appeal to her common sense.

"Then simply don’t faint."

"You don’t understand…"

"You’re the one who doesn’t understand. You owe me a debt: not only the cost of your wretched life, but all the money it cost me to feed and house you and your brat. If you refuse to work to pay off your debt, then that child of yours will have to do it for you."

"I’m not selling him to you," said Shen Qingqiu, disgusted. "He already earns his keep while running all those errands. What else can you possibly want from him?"

"He belongs to me by law. If a cow you own gives birth, then the calf is yours. I allowed him to work as a servant this far, but it’s a waste. With his pretty face and gentle disposition, he could go far."

"He’s a child," said Shen Qingqiu flatly. He was starting to think that his escape plan should start with the Madam’s death.

"He’s seven years of age, is he not? That means that in seven years he could start taking clients — just enough time to train him for it. Until then, he could provide entertainment. Pouring tea, making conversation... Some of the girls heard you teaching him how to play, that’s a good start."

Was that why Meng Shi refused to teach her child the qin?

"I’ll kill him with my own hands before I allow it," said Shen Qingqiu.

"Why are you so against the idea? You started your training around his age, did you not?”

"So what?" asked Shen Qingqiu. The conversation was beginning to make him uncomfortable. Of course, as a patron, he’d known how early the girls started their training and he even had some idea when they began to take clients. He simply preferred not to think of it.

"You believe he’s too good for our kind of work? Do you think he can actually live an honest life with a whore for a mother? They say that a prostitute’s son, even if raised well, will only become a brothel keeper! In the eyes of polite society your child was stained as soon as he left your womb. Just accept it."

Unfortunately, she was right. There was a reason why many prostitutes preferred to end the pregnancy or smother the baby as soon as it was born. A girl born to a brothel would certainly have to follow her mother’s footsteps, and it wasn’t that much better for boys.

"How much do I owe you?" asked Shen Qingqiu.

"What do you need the number for? You won’t be able to pay it in your lifetime."

She was most likely right. That was the way of the brothels. The way debt worked made sure that it was almost impossible for a prostitute to pay off her own debt.

"I'll return to work in three days. Don't bother Meng Yao with your ideas. "

"He has to contribute someday, you must understand. You're not getting any younger and he has his own debt to think of. A skilled prostitute at least has prospects. He might find someone to buy his contract."

"We'll speak of it later," gritted out Shen Qingqiu, just to make her leave. Thinking of selling children made him bloodthirsty.

When the child returned, Shen Qingqiu asked him to go on a walk together. Going outside his room for long was extremely unnerving. Without his cultivation, trapped in a weak female body, he felt stripped of all defences.

The hallway was empty at this time of day. It was still morning, so the brothel was closed to visitors and most workers were still asleep. After they went downstairs, they had to go through the main hall, where they met an old servant with a basket full of linen.

"Here you are, boy. Xin-mei was looking for you," said the servant. She seemed to be around fifty, so it was likely that she used to work as a prostitute herself before retiring.

"He's busy," said Shen Qingqiu, tugging the boy forward by his sleeve. He'd figured out that the exit was supposed to be somewhere around here.

The servant said something but they were too far away to hear.

"Anxin will be mad," said the boy.

"She'll get over it."

In a few days they would be far away from this brothel and its inhabitants so it didn't matter much if they made somebody displeased. Though Shen Qingqiu would have to make sure the brat didn't get beaten up. He'd be much slower if injured and they needed to be fast.

As they tried to go through the back door, the bored looking guard with a wispy moustache stopped them: "Where are you going?"

"Just for a short walk. I've been ill for a long time, so I need to regain my strength," said Shen Qingqiu, using his most gentle smile. He didn't have to use it since he was a beggar on the streets, thanking the stingy benefactors for their spare change.

"If you're not back in an hour, I'll have to send for you," said the guard unimpressed with his charms. Either his acting skills got rusty, or the brothel guard was immune to such things.

"Let's go to the river," said Shen Qingqiu as soon as they were outside. Meng Yao started walking and he followed the child through the narrow streets. Luckily, it was a small town, and the brothel was clearly catering to the passing merchants, so the river was nearby. That would make their getaway easier.

They walked till they reached the edge of the town. Shen Qingqiu noted a big oak tree with a hole in its trunk. It would do perfectly.

"Listen well, Meng Yao. In two days, I'll gather our belongings in a laundry basket. You'll pretend that you are going to wash the clothes in the river. Come here and hide all the clothes and other things in this oak tree over there. Bring back only the bedding and remember to make it wet so nobody asks any questions. When you're done, come to me. I'll ask you to take my qin to the master in town to fix a broken string. Instead you'll bring it here and hide it too, then wait for me. If somebody comes by, hide. It's important that nobody sees you. Do you understand everything?"

The boy nodded, "Mother… are we running away?"

"Yes."

"But you said if we run we won't have anywhere to go to."

The child was right. A runaway prostitute had no prospects as without household registration[1] she wouldn't be able to find legal work, rent property or get married. However, being more experienced in destitution Shen Qingqiu considered being a vagrant to be an improvement over being forced to sell his body.

"I know what I'm doing," lied Shen Qingqiu. He didn't feel guilty about deceiving a child. The brat was lucky he had someone looking out for him or he would be a prostitute's apprentice already.

"I can steal some food from the kitchen so we have some when we leave," offered the surprisingly bright brat. Shen Qingqiu hadn't thought of that. Being able to practice inedia for many years, he had forgotten that it was impossible to get far without sustenance.

"Do that, but don't get caught," ordered Shen Qingqiu.

In the evening Sisi came to his room with a worried look on her face and a pipa[2] in her hands, "Tingting is sick so there's no one to play today. The Madam said that you should be well enough to 'sit on your ass and fondle some strings'."

Shen Qingqiu sighed but didn't see the need to be too stubborn about it, "Alright, I'll need some time to get ready."

"I'll help you. Some clients were already complaining about the lacking entertainment, so the quicker you get ready the better."

For the first time in his life Shen Qingqiu felt grateful to Young Mistress Qiu for forcing him to play dress up with her. She liked to make him wear her clothes, then treated him like her doll, doing his hair and make up. If it wasn't for that shameful experience, he wouldn't know what to do. Sisi would definitely think it strange if he didn't know how to put on his own clothes.

Together they finished preparing him quickly and Shen Qingqiu gave a final look to Meng Shi's face in the mirror before leaving the room with the pipa. He didn't like how good his reflection looked, not when he was about to go down to the wolves den.

When he used to come to the brothel, he always asked for a private room, but he still got to see the disgusting festivities downstairs. He thought it made him prepared. He was wrong. Nothing could have prepared him for the leering looks and wandering hands that surrounded him. He could hardly breathe, and he suddenly felt faint.

"Give her space! Sit down here, Shi-mei[3]," said Sisi suddenly gentle. Then she forcibly showed Shen Qingqiu into a chair.

Not having much else to do, he started playing. He chose the brothel songs he knew, and to his surprise people here seemed to recognise them. He still didn't understand how this world worked.

He finished playing after the last patron went upstairs. His hands ached, and all he wanted was to go to bed, but as he moved to leave somebody dragged him back by the arm.

"Finally! I've been waiting for you all night," said a man with a big nose and an ugly scar at the corner of his mouth.

"You've waited in vain. I won't take any clients today."

He tried to tug himself free but his body was too weak.

"I'm your regular! Shouldn't you make an exception for me?"

[Name: Yuan Aiguo. Occupation: a street vendor. Role: an abusive regular. Preferences in bed: bondage, strangulation, name calling.]

His heart was beating like a rabbit's and indeed Shen Qingqiu felt like prey, unable to free himself. He almost didn't notice Meng Yao approach them urgently, his head bowed politely.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but Master Lau is asking what's taking so long," he said quickly.

The man let Shen Qingqiu go. "Next time then," he said, making Shen Qingqiu shudder. He hurried upstairs to the safety of his room, followed by Meng Yao.

"That was quick thinking," said Shen Qingqiu instead of a thank you.

"I don't like that man," said Meng Yao darkly. "He always hurts you."

"We're leaving soon, so he won't be a problem for much longer," said Shen Qingqiu quietly so they wouldn't be overheard. "Try not to attract any attention to yourself for now."

Shen Qingqiu's hands were shaking as he combed his hair. He needed to get out of here as soon as possible. He couldn't do it again. No. Anything but that.

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[1] A system of legally registering a person as a permanent resident of a specific location and household. A person's registration tied them to a specific place and social unit (family, estate, or institution like a brothel). It recorded their name, date of birth, parents, and social status. Without it, a person was effectively a non-citizen: an illegal vagrant who could be arrested,

denied work, and unable to participate in any formal aspect of society. return to text ↩

[2] A traditional Chinese lute. Pipa was often played to entertain the clients at brothels, while qin is an unusual choice. A prostitute owning and playing a qin, as Meng Shi does, is a mark of exceptional refinement. By making her play the pipa, the Madam not only fills in the place of a sick worker, but reminds Meng Shi of her place.return to text ↩

[3] -mei: a familiar and affectionate suffix, similar to "little sister". return to text ↩

Chapter 3: Back to the start.

On his last evening in the brothel, Shen Qingqiu came to talk to Sisi. He debated whether it was a good idea, but in the end decided that he owed her a little bit of truth. She'd probably be upset if she thought that something had happened to her friend and the child she was so fond of.

He'd knocked on her door before entering.

"I always know when it's you, Shi-mei, because you're the only one who bothers with manners around here," said the woman, amused. Her hair was still undone, her state of dress barely decent for male company, though she had no idea that a stranger's spirit could be possessing her sickly friend. He avoided looking at her too much, though he didn't care for her womanly charms.

"I wanted to say goodbye," said Shen Qingqiu quietly.

"What are you talking about?"

"You know what I'm talking about. I trust you enough not to spread it around."

"This is madness!" she shouted, then thought better of it and started whispering urgently. "You're going to get caught. Think of A-Yao!"

"I'm thinking of him. Whatever his fate is going to be, it'll be much worse if he stays here."

"Did the Madam say that he should begin training? She's just obsessed with the idea of adding a male to our ranks, because of the Crimson Lantern Playhouse's success. She forgets that we are not an acting troupe, so the clients we attract are rarely guided by southern wind [1]. I'll make her give up on the idea. Don't do anything hasty because of a few ill thought words."

"I'm not going to change my mind."

"Then the only thing I can do is to wish you luck," said Sisi tiredly. "So good luck, I guess."

"Thank you for everything."

[+ 1 Lore Point]

"What are you blabbering about?" thought Shen Qingqiu, irritably. The System usually piped up if there was a person he was supposed to know, but this time it started speaking nonsense.

[L points are awarded for deep emotional conversations.]

"And what am I supposed to do with this garbage?"

[L points can be exchanged for information about book lore.]

"You know what? I don’t care. So shut up," thought Shen Qingqiu. He had more important things to worry about.

"Look who’s out and about!" gasped a prostitute with an overabundance of rouge on her face upon seeing him.

[Name: Wang Anxin. Occupation: a prostitute in the Hundred Flowers Tower. Role: Meng Shi’s rival.]

"Rival?" he thought, surprised.

[Pay one L point to unlock this information.]

"Fine," he thought. At least this way he’d see how useful these points were.

[Sect Leader Jin was interested in Wang Anxin, before setting his eyes on Meng Shi. Ever since that Wang Anxin had harboured a grudge.]

"That’s it? Useless," concluded Shen Qingqiu in his mind.

He started coughing in a way that made it sound like he was going to choke on his own spit. "I’m sorry," he said in a faint voice. "I’m not feeling well."

"What are you spreading your sickness for?" said Anxin, taking a step back. "Go to your room and stay there!"

"I’m sorry," he said again. Anxin shook her head and left, making sure to give him a wide breath.

When Shen Qingqiu was finally setting in for the night, Meng Yao rushed into their room: "Anxin said that you were coughing again! Do I need to get Aunt Sisi?"

"I’m not sick, I just put on a show so that bitch would leave me alone," said Shen Qingqiu, too irritated to hold his tongue. He was back at the bottom again, so what if he wanted to swear?

"Mother!" gasped Meng Yao, scandalized.

"What else would you call her?"

"It’s improper to use such words. You told me that!"

"Well, obviously you can’t say things like that, but I’m an adult so I can do whatever I want."

"But that’s unfair!"

"This world is unfair," said Shen Qingqiu and threw himself down on the bed dramatically.

The next morning, when Meng Yao came to him with a laundry basket, Shen Qingqiu already had all the things they needed for their journey in hand. He packed the most expensive things

Meng Shi had in her room, along with some useful knick-knacks. There was only so much that a small child could carry, but Meng Shi owed so little they didn't have to leave much behind.

While the boy was doing his part of the plan, Shen Qingqiu went to do his. He went to the kitchens as soon as he saw the last servant leave, and retrieved several jars of oil, a sharp knife, and flint and steel. Next he went to the servants' quarters. He listened at the door, then opened it a crack and peeked inside. It was still empty. There in a wooden chest he found what he needed: a dark grey tunic and wrap-around black skirt. Quickly, he went back to his room and changed into the new set of clothes.

He was soaking his old clothes in oil when Meng Yao came back. The boy seemed surprised.

"Nobody should be able to tell who I am by the clothes," explained Shen Qingqiu.

He took his qin off the bed, cut one of its strings, and handed it to Meng Yao. The boy took it away silently, and Shen Qingqiu felt something akin to reminiscence: the brat once more reminded him of Ming Fan. Both did what they were told to do without asking unnecessary questions.

He waited for some time until he was sure that the boy had left the building. Then Shen Qingqiu emptied one of the oil jars onto his bed and floor and put the soaked clothes inside for safe keeping. After that he set the whole room on fire.

As he slipped out of the room, he could already smell the smoke in the hallway. It was only a matter of time before the fire was noticed, so he went to his next destination quickly: the Madam's chamber. It was near the entrance to the brothel and there was a guard close by. Luckily, Shen Qingqiu had a perfect excuse to drive the man away:

"There's a fire in one of the bedrooms!" he cried, widening his eyes and making them glisten. "No one can put it out."

The guard swore and rushed toward the bedrooms. Shen Qingqiu used a hairpin to pick the lock and went inside. The first thing of interest was the money chest, which was, unfortunately but predictably, locked. He decided to try his luck with it later, turning his attention to the cabinet that presumably contained the contracts. It was also locked, but its mechanism was much simpler, so he was able to pick it quickly.

His next step should've been to set the contracts on fire, but his curiosity got the best of him. He started looking through the contracts till he found Meng Shi's.

"Due to extreme poverty and the death of my parents, I, Shi (age 8) voluntarily pledge my body and labour to Madam Meng of the Hundred Flowers Tower to secure food, shelter and education.

From this day forward I am property of the Hundred Flowers Tower until my death, unless I pay off my debt. I will obey all orders, serving clients as Madam Meng demands. If I disobey, Madam Meng may punish me as she sees fit.

The money spent on my education shall accrue interest at 20% yearly. All costs for my food, clothing, and medicine will be added to my debt. Any children I bear become property of the Hundred Flowers Tower."

Shen Jiu was shaking with rage as he glared at the number 十 (ten) signed at the bottom of the contract. It was signed with a different hand: childish and unsteady. She changed her name from Shi as in 'ten' to Shi as in 'poetry'. [2] She also took the Madam's last name as her own.

From this contract, he could tell with certainty that he and Meng Shi had a childhood in common. Perhaps more than childhood. Waiting for years for a "noble cultivator" to come save them from their torment, Shen Jiu and Meng Shi were two peas in a pod.

He heard somebody running even through the door. Shen Jiu took the kitchen knife out of the bag on his belt and hid it inside his sleeve. The door opened with a bang.

"What are you doing here?!" screeched the Madam as soon as she saw him.

"You wouldn't tell me how much I owe you."

"Your contract won't help you with that!"

"Because I'm not supposed to be able to buy myself out."

"How dare you complain after all that money I wasted on your education! You promised me that you would attract rich clients if I hired you tutors and bought you books. Where are those clients?"

"I attracted a leader of a cultivation sect, didn't I?" said Shen Jiu, remembering the plot. From what he could see from this brothel it wasn't the type to attract such high profile clients.

"For a few years only! Then you got pregnant and refused to get an abortion when I told you to. If you're still stuck here, it's no fault of mine!"

"I'm leaving today, and you're not going to stop me."

"Leave if you want, I'll just send people to drag you back. But don't think you're taking the boy with you! I should have done what I wanted with him from the start."

The knife sliced through the Madam's throat very easily. The hot drops of blood sprayed on his face. It was just like he remembered.

The body dropped on the ground with a thud. She was still gurgling on her own blood when he took the keychain from around her neck.

The money box wasn't as full as he would have liked, but he took what was there. Once the money was safely inside his pouch, Shen Jiu took out his oil-soaked clothes and set them on fire, feeding his contract to the flames. Before leaving, he took all the other contracts from the cabinet and added them to the fire.

There was smoke everywhere. The fire must've spread. Shen Jiu didn't stay to see how far, fleeing through the main entrance. Nobody stopped him.

Only when he reached the river and saw Meng Yao step out of the bushes, where he had been hiding, Shen Jiu realised that he was still grasping the bloody knife. And because he was wearing servant's clothes, the sleeves weren't long enough to hide it from casual observers. At least the bloodstains weren't hard to identify, because his clothes were dark. He hoped that nobody had seen him, but part of him knew that luck was never on his side.

"Are you hurt, mother?" asked Meng Yao, staring at his bloody hands and the blood spots on his clothes in concern.

"It's not mine," said Shen Jiu, bending down to wash off the blood. "Prepare our things, I'll be back soon with a boat."

Shen Jiu walked along the river back to the docks. He could see the black smoke rising from the brothel in the distance. Whoever was at the docks must've joined the crowd of curious onlookers gathering near the Hundred Flowers Tower. That was very convenient for Shen Jiu, as he could jump into one of the unattended boats and paddle it down the river back to the place where Meng Yao was waiting.

As soon as the boat reached the boy, Shen Jiu jumped into the freezing water - near the shore it only reached his knees - and lifted the boy off the ground by his armpits to help him get inside the boat. After putting all their things inside the boat, Shen Jiu climbed aboard again and started paddling.

"Did you kill someone?" asked Meng Yao quietly after a while.

"So what if I did?"

"Was it the bad man who wouldn't leave you alone?"

"Why would I bother with that waste of space? It was someone much worse than him."

"Was it Anxin?"

Shen Jiu laughed humourlessly. "What would I kill her for?"

"She's rude and mean. She laughed at you when we thought you'd die. She's mean and stupid! "

"Most people are rude, mean and stupid. Should we kill all of them then?"

Meng Yao would grow into someone who killed a person for calling him "son of a whore" and kicking him down the stairs. He always looked so innocent, with his puffy little cheeks and big eyes, reminding Shen Jiu of Ning Yingying, so it was easy to forget what future was ahead of him.

"Then who did you kill?"

"The Madam."

Meng Yao's eyes widened, "But why her? She's nice. She gives me tanghulu[3] every year for my birthday and she always says 'well done' if you do the work well."

It was difficult to explain to a child that people who did monstrous things could also be nice and polite.

"She bought me when I was a child and made me sign a contract which bared me and my future children from freedom. If I let her live, we would still be stuck in the brothel, and she would eventually get her way and make you work as a prostitute. Would you like to take clients, Meng Yao?"

"The older sisters say I'd be good at that," said the boy quietly. He certainly would be, especially knowing who he grew up to be. Shen Jiu noted with amusement that a successful prostitute and a successful politician needed similar qualities, for instance, knowing how to smile when you want to punch somebody in the face.

"You probably would be. But you would be good at many other things better than that."

"But they won't let me try anything else," said the brat gloomily. "Because I'm a son of a prostitute."

"Who told you that?"

"The Madam said I won't be allowed to take the Imperial Exam[4] or become a disciple of a cultivation sect. She said that I could only ever be a servant."

She wasn't lying. There were also many small things she hadn't mentioned. Meng Yao was born into this world with a rock tied to his leg. He'd have had better chances in life if his mother abandoned him on some peasant family's doorstep.

"That's the truth. But you'll still become a cultivator, I'll make sure of that."

"Are we going to my father's sect?" asked the boy.

"Why do you think so?"

"You said my father was a cultivator. He could teach me."

"Your father is a waste of space. I'll teach you myself."

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[1] An ancient Chinese idiom referring to romantic or sexual relationships between men. return to text ↩

[2] Meng Shi changed her name from 十 (ten) to the homophone 诗 (poetry). return to text ↩

[3] A traditional Chinese street snack consisting of fruit, typically hawthorn berries, skewered on a bamboo stick and coated with a hardened, clear, and crunchy layer of crystallized sugar syrup. return to text ↩

[4] A Chinese civil service exam used to select candidates for the state bureaucracy based on merit rather than birth or connections. However, as a son of a prostitute Meng Yao belongs to jiànmin ("mean people") class and is legally barred from ever taking the exams.return to text ↩

Chapter 4: On the road.

The fire must've struck a chord in Shen Jiu's memory because he woke up screaming in the middle of the night. He hoped that Master Qiu had reincarnated into a horse and was whipped every day. Or, even better, was turned into a mule. The bastard deserved to be castrated.

"Mother?" asked Meng Yao, still half asleep.

"Go back to sleep," said Shen Jiu, hugging the brat closer. It was a moment of weakness. He still didn't understand why the boy's presence had such a calming effect on him. The warmth on his front and the freezing cold on his back reminded him of the days long forgotten. He banished the memories.

They were lying together in the roots of a big oak tree. There was little wind, and they were covered with Meng Shi's woollen winter cloak, but it was still chilly at night. Surprisingly, Shen Jiu managed to fall back asleep and slept dreamlessly for the rest of the night.

When he woke up in the morning, he pretended that nothing had happened. Meng Yao didn't ask any questions, so it was easy enough to pretend.

He decided to abandon the boat in the bushes where they had hidden it the night before and continue the rest of the way on foot, going along the river. He knew enough to survive in the wild, even with a living burden like a child.

They walked for the rest of the day, stopping several times to drink or to have something to eat. Meng Yao was hilariously strict with food rationing, trying to stretch the food they had as far as he could. Shen Jiu wasn't as worried about the food. If they got hungry enough, they could eat some tree bark or try to fish. It wasn't that big of a problem.

In the evening, they stopped in a small, windless clearing to rest for the night. Shen Jiu was dead on his feet, and his throat was sore. He blamed his useless body for that. Before, he'd hardly ever gotten ill, even when he was a child living on the streets.
Despite his exhausted state, he forced the droopy-faced Meng Yao to meditate with him. The child almost fell asleep several times, so he had to poke him awake.

The next day passed in the same manner. They had barely talked the whole day, but the silence wasn't uncomfortable. At least if Shen Jiu had to be stuck with some brat, it was a tolerable one.

On the third day, they reached a village. It wasn't a big one - not more than ten houses. It was the type of village in the middle of nowhere that got decimated by some minor ghost because cultivators couldn't be bothered to get there on time. As soon as he saw the village, Shen Jiu decided to turn back and set for the night somewhere nearby. To pass the time, he decided to work on the boy's training.

"Meng Yao, stand in front of me with your legs far apart."

The boy complied without question.

"Wider. Bend your knees and sink your hips down, like you're sitting in a chair. Good. Straighten your back and plant your feet. Not like that."

Shen Jiu shoved the brat, making him fall to the ground.

"Your root is too weak. Try again. Your knees and your toes should be pointing forward."

He kept pointing, prodding, and at times demonstrating until he was satisfied with the result.

"Remain in this position until I tell you to stop," ordered Shen Jiu, then went on to do his own business.

He counted the money they had. It was enough to buy a horse or three child slaves. He was planning to stretch it as far as he could. As he was counting, he began to cough.

"Are you alright? Are you getting ill again? Should we find a doctor?" asked Meng Yao anxiously. Despite his worry, he maintained the horse stance. That saved him from punishment.

"I'm fine. Don't get distracted."

After counting the money, he fixed the qin string and played one of his favourite songs to check how well tuned it was. He was planning to play another song when he glanced at Meng Yao's red, sweat-streaked face and felt unexpectedly benevolent.

"You can rest," he said.

The boy dropped to the ground.

"You'll practice this stance every morning."

"Did my father teach you this?" asked the boy.

Shen Jiu scoffed, "I don't need your father to have taught me something to know a thing or two. I used to watch cultivators train."

"Why?" asked the brat. Despite being quiet and obedient, he could be annoyingly inquisitive at the most unfortunate times. That, together with his adorable little face, reminded Shen Jiu of Ning Yingying.

"I wished to become a cultivator myself," said Shen Jiu, having thought of a convenient lie. If he were Meng Shi, he would've wanted to become a cultivator. That was the only way up for the likes of them, because some cultivators didn't care about status and could teach even scum that everybody else was too disgusted to touch.

"Was that how you met my father?"

Shen Jiu sighed, "What do you know about your father?"

"He’s a powerful cultivator," said the child. Shen Jiu waited some more, but there wasn’t a continuation.

"That’s it? Was it everything I’ve told you? Do you know his name at least?"

"But you didn’t tell me! You said that you’d tell me when I’m older," for the first time since they had met, Shen Jiu saw something resembling irritation on the child’s face.

He didn’t know what to do with the fact that the brat didn’t know who his father was. It was probably smart of Meng Shi. It was better to reveal something like that once you’re sure that the brat will keep his mouth shut about it.

"It doesn’t matter who your father is because he’ll never admit that you’re his son. Your father is a no-good peace of shit, and it’s better for us to stay as far away from him as we can."

"But you said…"

"I lied to you because I thought you were too young to know the truth. There’s no gallant cultivator to come rescue us, so we’ll have to survive on our own."

After that, Meng Yao turned gloomy. He didn’t even pester Shen Jiu with questions when his cough returned, becoming more and more frequent as the night approached. Despite that, the boy meditated without arguing before going to sleep, though the look on his face was rather petulant.

After making sure that the brat was dead to the world, Shen Jiu returned to the village. He had the knife in his sleeve, but he hoped he wouldn’t have to use it.

He chose the biggest house, not wanting to rob someone who was struggling. Upon closer inspection, it turned out that the front door was locked from the inside with a crossbar. The only way to go inside was to break a wooden lattice on one of the windows. However, when Shen Jiu wanted to go around the house, he noticed a dog. He froze. If it started barking, it was over for him.

He was thinking what to do next when his eyes fell on the bamboo pole with drying clothes that somebody must’ve forgotten to take down. There wasn’t much clothing on it but the simple hemp tunic would be at least something that he could disguise himself with. A peasant woman with a child travelling somewhere was less conspicuous than a woman in servant’s clothes.

Shen Jiu stole a woman’s hemp tunic and a pair of loose trousers which definitely belonged to a man. Both items were muted brown and had signs of being patched up a few times.

He could try another house, but it was getting too hard to keep himself from coughing, so he went back to Meng Yao, highly disappointed with his feeble trophies. Shen Jiu of his youth would have been ashamed of his future self’s lacking skills.

The next day, when Meng Yao was practicing the horse stance, Shen Jiu tried on the stolen clothes. The trousers were obviously too big for him, falling off his frame and making a convincing impression of a hemp sack. The tunic, despite belonging to a woman, was also too big, but not as much. Its owner was definitely much taller than Meng Shi. Luckily, a sewing kit was one of the things Shen Jiu put in the basket that Meng Yao had smuggled out of the brothel. He was sure that he could adjust the clothes so they wouldn't fall off him.

After another day of walking, Shen Jiu got so ill that they had to stay in a roadside inn for three days. The brat even asked the inn-owner to summon a doctor from the nearest village behind his back, making them waste money on medicine. At least they were able to use this opportunity to listen for any rumours of a manhunt after them. He only heard something about a brothel burning down. Nobody even knew whether it was an arson or an accident.

After Shen Jiu got better, they walked for five more days, with Meng Yao making constant demands for them to take a break on Shen Jiu's behalf. He maintained that he wasn't an invalid, but the boy could be relentless.

Then they had to stop because they ran out of food, and Shen Jiu decided to try his hand at fishing. He was lucky that his new body was quite nimble despite the recent illness, so after struggling for a few hours, he got a hang of it. He used to be quite good at fishing when he was younger. He even taught Meng Yao how to fish and laughed nastily when the boy fell into the river and got soaked.

Stopping to fish along the way, they went along the river for seven more days till they reached a town. According to the first local they encountered, it was Yiling, which Shen Jiu was pleased to hear. He wasn't sure whether going along the river would be enough, though he vaguely remembered characters using boats in the last part of the book.

The first place they went to was a small shop with second-hand clothes, where Shen Jiu chose something decent for him and Meng Yao. They needed to look struggling, but only recently, so people felt more pity for them. A dirty beggar got much less pity than an actual human like them who'd just recently fallen on hard times. Shen Jiu explained that in detail to Meng Yao, while they washed themselves as best as they could in the river and put on their new clothes.

"When I was your age, I used to pretend to be an orphaned child of two merchants. I begged passers-by to give me money so I could travel to my relatives in another town. They gave me way more money this way. You see, they looked at me and imagined something like that happening to their own children, so they became generous, thinking their money would help me."

"Are we going to beg on the streets?" asked Meng Yao, looking hilariously appalled. Apparently, there were depths he still didn't want to sink to. Shen Jiu thought about offering the brat to look for their dinner in the garbage, just for a laugh.

"Of course not. Begging on another man's turf is the surest way to get shanked in your sleep. We're going to ask for a job in a local inn. Remember that your father had died recently and you're very upset by that."

"We will also need to change our names a bit. My name will be Shen Shi. As we're going to pretend that you're a legitimate child, your surname will have to be different. Let's make it Yue Yao. If somebody asks what your father's name was, say that he was called Yue Qingyuan and he was a cultivator."

Yue Yao - Jade of the Mountain. The name was quite poetic, though it wasn't an easy decision to make. He thought about thinking up a random name for the boy's father, but that didn't sit well with him for some reason, no matter how many options he thought of. When he thought about taking somebody's name, and Yue Qingyuan was the first person to come to mind.

The man had certainly not deserved such a tribute, but it would be easy to spin some story about him if Shen Jiu was asked about his late husband. And the man certainly wouldn't mind pretending to be some random child's father if the child's safety was depending on the subterfuge. He was stupid like that.

"Who's Yue Qingyuan?"

"No one."

"You didn't say his name like he was no one."

"He was a friend a very long time ago. Stopped being a friend, but would lie about being your father in a heartbeat. He was stupidly noble like that. Always caring about strangers and forgetting about… Never mind. Just remember this name."

The stupid System chose that moment to chime annoyingly, making him seethe.

The local inn was located near the lively market. They learned its name: the Drunken Poet's Rest, from a faded signboard hanging on only one chain. Shen Jiu sincerely doubted that poets came to these places often.

The main door was ajar as they approached, probably to try airing out the smell of damp wood and cheap alcohol. Despite the sorry state of the inn, it seemed to be popular enough to attract some clientele, most of whom seemed to be fishermen.

The owner nodded at them from behind the counter, "Need a room?" he asked after having given a too-long glance to Shen Jiu's chest.

It didn't take long to talk the man into lowering the price, especially considering that Shen Jiu was planning to stay for at least a month. The room smelled of mold, making Shen Jiu wince upon entering, but otherwise, it was functional and would serve its purpose.

He longed for being a Peak Lord. Back then, people got all over themselves to provide him with the best accommodations. It was always satisfying to see the people, who would gladly spit on him when he was a slave child, lowering themselves like the dogs they were.

Shen Jiu asked for their food to be brought to the room, not wanting to attract attention. He chose clothes in mourning whites for them deliberately so that people wouldn't ask too many

questions, but drunkards usually weren't so reasonable. At least the inn owner wasn't the inquisitive sort, though his leery gaze was so revolting that Shen Jiu almost wished he'd ask questions instead.

After dinner, which seemed delicious simply because they had nothing but unseasoned fish for a week, Shen Jiu waited for Meng Yao to fall asleep, put on his dark cloak, and set out. He needed to see Burial Mounds with his own eyes before deciding what to do next. Without a way to protect themselves, they'd be doomed, so he was going to take any opportunity to gain some power.

Chapter 5: The Burial Mounds

He had to wander for hours through the forest at the bottom of the mountain until he encountered a tall wall filled with protective incantations. They were carved deep into the dark stone, their edges sharp enough to cut through skin. Here it was, the Burial Mounds.

Shen Jiu climbed a nearby tree and tried to use it to get on the wall, but the barrier didn't let him through. Annoyed, he hit the invisible barrier with a clenched fist. The only thing it did was hurt his hand.

He climbed back down to study the incantations more carefully. They weren't any different from the ones in his world so he could tell that they were not only keeping the dead outside but also keeping the living from going inside. He also knew what to change to make a small breach for himself.

Using only his knife he chipped at the incantations slowly, getting rid of the two of them completely and modifying a third one. By the end of it he was sweaty with exhaustion, and his knife was bent and hardly usable. He would need to buy a new one at the earliest convenience.

After giving a final assessing look to the wall, he climbed the tree again and stepped on the black stone. This time the barrier let him do it with no issue.

Even on the wall he could feel the Burial Mounds with his whole body. The air itself was thick with something that made you want to run away as far as you could as if you were being hunted by a predator. Suddenly cold, Shen Jiu felt goosebumps cover his skin, and soon he started shivering. He clenched his teeth to keep them from clattering.

Shen Jiu could see the dead wandering around, could almost smell their filth and rot, so he didn't go down and instead settled to meditate on the wall itself. As he sat down he heard a faint whisper, but when he looked around he couldn't see anything.

He had no idea how Wei Wuxian did it in the book, but knowing that he was able to cultivate his path without a golden core was enough. If he could do it, then Shen Jiu could as well. This was just too good a weapon not to use.

At first he tried meditating on his most resentful thoughts. He remembered every injustice, every humiliation until his shivers turned into tremors of rage. He tried to channel this energy like qi, but couldn't feel a thing.

After a while he decided to change his approach and tried to draw resentment from outside. This place had to help him somehow so it made sense if he needed to connect to it somehow.

As he was opening himself to the resentment around him, he felt warm breath on the back of his neck and jumped away in disgust, grabbing the now useless knife before he realised that there was no threat. "Damn you," he thought. "You won't scare me away that easily."

He sat like this for a while when he felt something. It was scratchy and hot, right in his chest. He coughed, covering his mouth with his hand. As he drew the hand back he saw dark blood on it and winced at the taste of metal in his mouth. His body couldn't take any more experiments. Something was missing.

'I will have to try again another day,' he thought before going back to Meng Yao. He'd find a way to master this way of cultivation, he was sure of it, but he needed time.

When he opened the door to their room, a small figure rushed forward. Small hands clung to his skirt, making him wince. As he looked down his gaze met with a pair of frightened hazel eyes.

"Mom [1], where have you been? I woke up and you were gone."

Meng Yao seemed to be really disturbed by his absence. Somehow Shen Jiu had forgotten how young the child was. Although to be fair, at his age Shen Jiu had no mother to cling to (he had thrown a fit once when he woke up and Qi-ge wasn't there; he decided that it was completely different and irrelevant to the situation).

"I couldn't sleep, so I went for a walk," he lied.

"Your clothes are dirty."

"I know," he lied again. Having been a cultivator, he had somewhat forgotten how hard it was for regular people to keep their clothes clean, so he was wearing the same clothes he wore during the day. The problem was that he had deliberately chosen a whitish color, to appear as a widow [2]. Of course, he'd put on his dark cloak on top so he'd be less noticeable in the dark, but with all the tree climbing and tearing through bushes it wasn't enough to save the white from staining.

After being given a visual confirmation that Shen Jiu hadn't abandoned him, Meng Yao finally let him go and started his morning routine of physical training, which Shen Jiu was gradually extending. Currently it took the boy around an hour to finish, so Shen Jiu decided to take a nap in the meantime.

He woke up grasping at his throat. He felt like he couldn't breathe, like somebody wouldn't let him breathe. Even after he had woken up, he couldn't get rid of the feeling of phantom fingers on his throat. He recalled clawing at the assailant's arms and almost expected to find blood under his nails when he looked down on his hands. There was nothing.

"Meng Yao, come here," he called, giving in to the weakness. "I'll do your hair. You're a son of a cultivator now, you can't go out with your hair loose."

The boy knelt on the floor before Shen Jiu, who started to brush his hair. It was good hair for a servant: thick and soft, Meng Shi must've used her own hair oil on him. Shen Jiu did the same. He tied the hair in two buns using Meng Shi's red silk ribbons.

"You can stand now."

As the boy turned to face him, Shen Jiu noted that with the new hairstyle Meng Yao resembled Ning Yingying even more. If only he'd been a girl. That would make playing the role of his mother much easier.

After breakfast they went to the market, where Shen Jiu was planning to start his plan of finding some source of income.

"Do we need to buy something?" asked Meng Yao. He kept raising his hands to touch his hair as if he wanted to check that the buns were still in place.

"We need to get acquainted with some of the people well-respected in this community. Without that there's no hope of finding a job, and without one we're going to run out of money at some point."

He had thought that they'd be able to find employment in the inn, if he pretended to run out of money and asked to pay with labor. However, after seeing the innkeeper's lecherous eyes he decided against it. Who knew what that degenerate might ask if he thought Shen Jiu desperate enough to agree.

"And we should do it at the market because there are a lot of people?"

"Yes. Pay attention to what people around us say. Think of it as your training. Cultivators often have to gather information about the locals."

They heard a few interesting things and a lot of useless drivel. There was a powerful landowner, Sun Yusheng, who was known for his overabundance of daughters and lack of sons. For some reason, the vegetable stall owner thought that getting a second wife would help with the "problem." Idiot. If Shen Jiu in some bizarre twist of fate decided to procreate, he'd wish for daughters and daughters only. Who wanted to deal with boys?

There were also two wealthy merchants whose names got mentioned: one had apparently arranged his competitor's death, and the other was notoriously fond of women, having gotten several local girls pregnant.

Shen Jiu was enraged after hearing the story of one of those girls, who was disowned by her family despite the fact that she claimed that their encounter wasn't consensual. If he managed to learn the ghost path, he'd start with creating a ghost who'd bite off the dicks of all rapists in its vicinity.

He was so distracted by his fury that he flinched the moment the System spoke to him.

[Attention, User! You're about to miss an important character!]

"What are you talking about?" he thought.

[Warning! Spoiler!]

"Spoil- what?"

The System didn't say anything more. He looked around but didn't see anyone of note.

He did notice a brat, though.

It wasn't his brat. Just some street kid, dirty and pathetic-looking, with his bare legs covered with bite wounds. Instead of stealing or at least begging for food, the brat just looked at the food stall with wet cow eyes. He wouldn't live through winter, that's for sure.

"Mother?" asked Meng Yao. Shen Jiu had no idea when he had returned. "Are you alright?"

The woman who was selling baozi [3] must've thought that the brat was scaring away potential customers because she screamed at him to go away. As he didn't leave immediately, she raised a hand with a towel. Shen Jiu expected to hear the slapping sound.

"There's no need for violence, Madam," said Meng Yao respectfully, approaching the baozi stall calmly with his head lowered. "Come with me, didi [4]. Let's not make a scene." Then he took the brat by his dirty little hand and led him to Shen Jiu.

"Can we spare him some food?" Meng Yao asked. Shen Jiu should have said something about it being useless to feed somebody who would surely die either way. Instead he looked in Meng Yao's big hopeful eyes and nodded. He didn't expect Meng Yao to solve the situation so gracefully and in a manner befitting of a noble cultivator. It was impressive. Shen Jiu was sure that none of his former disciples could deal with the situation that well.

Shen Jiu didn't want to give his hard-stolen money to the baozi stall owner, so he went to a soup stall instead. It was probably better for the brat's stomach anyway. Who knew how long he'd gone without food? The first time Shen Jiu ate his fill, he had to deal with stomach issues the whole night. It didn't stop him from overeating the next time though.

The brat grabbed the bowl as soon as it was handed to him and started drinking the soup so greedily that for a moment Shen Jiu worried that he would choke. When the boy finished and returned the bowl, he thanked Shen Jiu and Meng Yao several times.

"What's your name, didi?" asked Meng Yao, before the boy could leave.

"Wei Ying," said the boy shyly and smiled.

Shen Jiu was officially an idiot. He had no idea how that slipped his mind. He was so focused on Wei Wuxian coming to Yiling later in life that he'd forgotten that it was actually the place he used to wander at as a street child. He'd almost missed the only person who could help him with figuring out the ghost path.

"I'm Yue Yao, and my mother is Shen Shi," said Meng Yao, looking at Shen Jiu as if expecting to be praised for remembering two names. Shen Jiu ignored him.

"Where are your parents?" asked Shen Jiu, despite knowing the answer.

"They went on a night hunt and never came back."

"They are dead then," said Shen Jiu bluntly. The brat didn't look surprised. Perhaps he had been told that before. Meanwhile, Meng Yao looked scandalized. Did he want Shen Jiu to

give the brat useless platitudes instead?

"How old are you?" asked Shen Jiu, trying to remember at what age Wei Wuxian was picked up by the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.

"Five... no, six! My birthday is when all the leaves fall down."

They probably had enough time, Shen Jiu decided. He wouldn't bother if the brat would go away in a few months, but a few years had to be enough to experiment.

"From this day you're my student," he declared. "You must call me Shizun."

The boy stared at him dumbly. Meng Yao looked very much the same.

"I'll teach you how to read and write, and what I know of cultivation. But you'll have to be quiet and obedient, or I'll change my mind. Got it?"

"Y-yes," said the boy. He didn't sound sure. It was probably to hopeful to expect somebody as annoying as Wei Wuxian to be quiet and obedient, but Shen Jiu had experience dealing with problem children. If it came to that, he'd beat the obedience into the brat.

"Do you mean for A-Ying to come live with us, Mother?" asked Meng Yao incredulously. Meng Shi must not have been a very charitable person.

"You need a sparring partner. And he has got to have potential if his parents were cultivators. It's not like he'd take much space. He can sleep on the floor."

Though it would be difficult to tolerate some brat in his space, especially at night time. For a moment, Shen Jiu wondered whether the possibility of power was worth the inconvenience. He supposed he could throw the brat away if he proved to be useless.

"I've always wanted a little brother," said Meng Yao suddenly. Now it was Shen Jiu's turn to be incredulous. He could see the worth of older brothers, but why anyone would want a younger one was beyond him.

"We'll need to wash the grime away before allowing him inside. He might have fleas," said Shen Jiu, looking at the child's clothes, which the boy had outgrown a long time ago. He didn't want the innkeeper to see them picking up a stray: it would attract too much attention, people just weren't kind enough to take in random street brats, unless they were deviants.

"Yue Yao, go back to the inn and bring your old clothes and a towel to the riverbank. We're going to say that he's our servant who was away running some errands."

Meng Yao scurried away quickly.

The protagonist still looked confused. "You really will let me stay with you?"

"I can't teach a street rat, can I? Now let's make you look less like a rat and more like a human being."

The brat was much less obedient than Meng Yao, not wanting to get into the freezing river and daring to doubt Shen Jiu's judgement when he told him to scrub some more. Teaching him would be really annoying, but to get the boy's help with the ghost's path, somebody had to teach him the regular path first.

As soon as Meng Yao arrived, the brat came out of the river, shivering, "I'm done."

"No, you're not. If you dirty my towel, I'll drown you," said Shen Jiu, and gave the brat a hard look until he dunked himself in the water again. "Make sure to scrub."

Meng Yao laughed, covering his face with his sleeve. Shen Jiu had no idea what was so funny about the situation.

Finally, after Shen Jiu gave his approval, Wei Ying was allowed to dry himself with a towel and put on Meng Yao's old servant clothes. It was slightly big on him, but not by much. Shen Jiu had a feeling that Wei Ying would quickly outgrow Meng Yao despite being a year younger.

Back in the inn, the innkeeper didn't even notice the second child, likely too distracted by Shen Jiu's breasts. He reminded himself to block the door at night so nobody would be able to open it from the outside. He had already been sleeping with a knife under his pillow, but more security would do no harm.

When the time came to go to bed, they arranged a sleeping place for the brat as far from their bed as Shen Jiu could manage. Shen Jiu hoped that this, together with Meng Yao's soothing presence, would be able to solve the problem: Wei Ying was a man, despite being six years old and utterly pathetic. Shen Jiu did manage to fall asleep somehow, which was somewhat of a success, but his sleep was shallow and full of nightmares. That made him even less charitable to the brat.

He ordered Meng Yao to teach his new martial brother how to meditate and instruct him in writing before leaving for the market again. That effectively made the brat Meng Yao's problem, giving Shen Jiu some time for social manoeuvring. He wandered around the market again till he saw a suitable older lady, not too high in status, but not too low, and clearly a local.

Shen Jiu approached her, keeping his head low and his eyes down, and said: "Excuse me, Grandmother. [5] I'm sorry to disturb you, but could you point me toward the local shrine?"

"A new face, aren't you? What brings you to Yiling? You don't look like the usual sort to come here."

"My honorable husband had died recently, and my son and I were forced to leave our home. I hoped to stay with my sister, but we've lost contact after she got married to a rogue cultivator. I've decided that it's better for my son to stay somewhere stable until I'm able to contact her."

"You poor thing," said the woman. "Of course, you'd want to pray after such an ordeal."

She explained how to get to a shrine, and Shen Jiu went there to keep up appearances. He needed the locals to think that he was a widow of good character, and going to a shrine regularly would help with that.

The shrine itself was rather small. Located beneath the branches of an ancient tree in the center of the town, it could fit no more than three people inside. Above the entrance there was an old plaque with the inscription "Prayers Answered." There was no door, so as Shen Jiu approached, he could see that somebody was already inside.

The figure was bowing low before the altar, but Shen Jiu could already tell by the peach silk brocade of the gown that she was wealthy. Instead of a calm prayer, all he could hear was a stream of mumbled apologies.

"I'm really sorry, please, just leave me alone!" pleaded the woman before standing up. As she was leaving the shrine, she passed by Shen Jiu and he noticed dark purple bruises on the upper side of her neck.

He remembered the feeling of hands on his neck that morning. Qiu Jianluo did a lot of despicable things to him, but he never strangled him. It could be Meng Shi's body remembering, that would make the bruised woman a simple coincidence. Or everything could be connected to the Burial Mounds. He'd have to investigate that.

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[1] Here Meng Yao switches from his usual "Mother" (Mǔqīn) a more formal term for mother used by the children of gentry to less formal "Mom" (Niáng). The son of a sect leader would never call his mother "Mom" 娘 (Niáng), so Meng Shi must've made her son switch the form of address to a more formal one. return to text ↩

[2] In ancient China, the traditional color of mourning was white, not black. return to text ↩

[3] Steamed buns with fillings, a common street food. return to text ↩

[4] Direct translation is "little brother". It was used as a common and affectionate term for a younger boy or a young male friend. Basically by addressing Wei Ying this way Meng Yao says that he'll take responsibility for him, taking the role of an older brother.return to text ↩

[5] "Grandmother" (Nǎinai). A polite term used by a younger person to address an older, unfamiliar woman. return to text ↩

Chapter 6: Investigation.

Shen Jiu was beginning to regret taking in the brat.

He hadn't slept properly in three days. Every time he managed to fall asleep he woke up in an hour or two gasping in fear and trying to shake off the sensation of male hands on his body. It wasn't the first time he struggled with sleep, but before, he had his cultivation to sustain him. Without its help he felt brittle and stretched thin.

He returned to the Burial Mounds only once and didn't have any success, if one didn't count the fact that this time he didn't end up coughing blood as success. He needed Wei Wuxian, but he only had Wei Ying, who had barely started his training and was often too intimidated to speak in Shen Jiu's presence.

On the third sleepless night he seriously considered kicking the brat down the wall of the Burial Mounds in hope that this would speed up the transformation. He decided to use it as the last resort, because he was pretty certain that the brat wouldn't survive the ordeal.

He should've been glad that the brat was at least bright enough to learn quickly, but it only made him madder. Shen Jiu should've left the brat in the gutter. Lucky bastard would be saved in a few years either way.

"Do it again," he ordered, after the boys had finished the new set. Despite his recent start, Wei Ying was catching up quicker than Shen Jiu would prefer.

After hearing the order, Meng Yao stopped gasping for breath and said, "Mother, we have been training since early morning and it's already noon. Perhaps we could take a break?"

"Don't be pathetic, Yue Yao. Look at the street brat on your right, is he asking for a break? Do you want him to surpass you? That will happen soon if you are lazy."

Meng Yao frowned, but took an appropriate stance. He'd understand later in life that Shen Jiu was doing him a favour. When someone was as lucky and talented as Wei Wuxian, you had to be careful not to get left alone in the dust. Either you trained thrice as hard, or got smart about it and sabotaged the competition.

He let them go in an hour, not out of the kindness of his heart but because their forms were getting progressively sloppier and he was tired of correcting them. He considered ordering them to find their own food, but Meng Yao had such a tragic look on his face that Shen Jiu found himself handing him the money before he could talk himself out of it.

Shen Jiu was going too soft on the boy and he despised the fact, but for some reason every time Meng Yao looked truly upset he got this strange urge to do something about it. It had to be his body meddling with his mind. Animal instinct, nothing more.

After leaving Meng Yao and the brat to their own devices, Shen Jiu continued his investigation. He had already made significant progress by drawing the woman he'd seen and

asking around. To make himself seem less suspicious, he lied that this drawing had been sent to him by his alleged sister, whom he was trying to get in contact with.

This way he had found out that the bruised woman was called Sun Peizhi. She was one of the numerous daughters of the local landowner, and in an unfortunate twist of fate was married to the rapist merchant. Shen Jiu considered that her bruises could have been left by her brute of a husband, but it was too strange a coincidence.

Either way, he needed to speak to her. Considering the difference in their status, a meeting would be difficult to achieve without help, so he asked his newest acquaintance Madam Qiao to help him. He chose her because she'd seemed sympathetic when he asked her the way, and she had also already heard his lie about the missing sister, so it was easy to add to it, showing her "his sister's" drawing. A cultivator's wife was respectable enough to befriend a landowner's daughter, so his lie was easily believed and the meeting arranged.

The main difficulty was that Madam Qiao was present for this meeting, having called both of them for tea, so Shen Jiu couldn't speak frankly. He had to waste half an hour saying pleasant things about the tea, the food, the choice of the venue, Madam Qiao's character, the weather, Sun Peizhi's appearance, Sun Peizhi's character… He hated having to be polite. When he was a peak lord he could be as blunt and taciturn as he liked. He missed that freedom.

Finally, after running out of meaningless banalities, he could tell his already familiar lie about looking for a lost sister, who Sun Peizhi might be acquainted with. Poor woman looked completely lost.

"I apologise, but you must be mistaken. I have no acquaintances that fit the description," said Sun Peizhi after he described Sisi to her.

"Perhaps my description was lacking. Oh, I forgot one thing! She used to wear this wide necklace with purple flowers around her neck," said Shen Jiu brightly and made a deliberate gesture with his head, allowing her to see the purple bruises he'd drawn with Meng Shi's makeup in the morning. His hair didn't allow Madam Qiao to see the "bruises", but Sun Peizhi got a good look.

Her eyes widened and she quickly went pale.

"I'm sorry, but you're mistaken. Thank you for inviting me, Madam Qiao, but my husband doesn't like it when I'm away for long."

Shen Jiu must've been too heavy handed. He didn't mean to spook her quite that badly, though it could also be useful. He'd have to wait a bit. She could contact him once she had time to think.

He didn't have to wait for long. The next evening a maid came to his door, inviting him to secretly meet with her mistress. She even had a set of servant's clothes for Shen Jiu to wear, so he'd attract less attention at the merchant's estate.

Silently, she led him through the less travelled streets, till they reached the merchant's compound, which they entered through the servant's door. Then they had to go through the

estate, hiding every time they heard someone's footsteps. The disguise would help only from afar.

Finally, they reached what appeared to be Sun Peizhi's personal garden. Surrounded by the tall white wall with moon gates and latticed windows offering tasteful glimpses of bamboo, it had decent Feng Shui. Though Shen Jiu would remove the peach tree. It must've grown too big over the years and was pressing against the building's wall, which was ill advised[1] .

"Thank you, Xiao Fang," said Sun Peizhi to the maid. "Please make sure that nobody comes here. If my husband tries to come in, tell him I've been throwing up."

The maid bowed and left them alone in the garden.

"What did you want to talk about?" he asked, looking at Sun Peizhi's pale face. There were dark shadows under her eyes, she must've had trouble sleeping. He could sympathise - his face likely looked just as haggard.

"You were the one who called for my attention with your… necklace."

"I'll be frank. I overheard your prayer in the shrine and noticed the bruises. Recently I've had a dream where somebody strangled me. A dream too real to be simply a dream."

"But why would she torment you? You're a nobody."

"I don't know. But if you tell me what you know about her, I might be able to solve the issue. My husband was a cultivator, so I know a thing or two."

"A cultivator? I thought about calling for one, but my husband would be furious. Even though it's all his fault. Oh, why doesn't she torment him for what he did, I couldn't help her, I truly couldn't!"

"What did he do?"

Sun Peizhi hugged herself as if she was cold. Her eyes were downcast, but he still noticed the shadows of guilt. He knew this expression very well. He loathed seeing that expression on the face of the one he used to trust unconditionally.

"You're new to Yiling, so you probably don't know how my husband shames me. A few months ago a scholar's daughter had accused him of forcing himself on her and getting her with a child. Her parents must've found out about the pregnancy and disowned her, so she had nowhere to go. Poor thing, I believed her immediately, I know my husband well… Though sometimes I wish I didn't. I told him he should take her as a second wife, but he refused."

"Why?"

"He was angry that she had shamed him in front of the whole town. People with daughters started to avoid our house and he lost some clients. I couldn't do anything else for her. Two weeks ago her body was found in the woods hanging from a tree."

"She killed herself?"

"No, everybody thinks she did. Oh, how her mother cried… it was terrible! But no, I saw him come home late that night, and I saw the bloody scratches on his arms. He killed her, I'm sure."

"So your husband killed that girl and she's tormenting you for keeping it a secret," concluded Shen Jiu. A pregnant woman, defiled and murdered by her rapist… It had to be a really powerful ghost.

"But I can't tell! He'd just kill me too. Why can't she just torment him, oh why? Can you make her stop? I'll give you everything! I have so much jewellery, you can take it all! You could buy a house with it…"

"Calm down. I can deal with the spirit, but I'll need access to your room at night. Can you accept three new servants?"

"Three?"

"I have two children with me whom I can't leave alone. They also know some cultivation, so they might be helpful."

"I'll arrange everything you need. Just promise that you'll free me from this spirit!"

"I promise." Oh, how he hated these words, but at the moment it was the best way to avoid further hysteria.

Back in the inn, he told the boys the whole story, though to his surprise Wei Ying had problems understanding some of it. How could the boy have spent a year living on the streets and still somehow not know where the babies came from? Did he not talk to any other children? As nobody had given the child the talk, Shen Jiu entrusted this task to Meng Yao. He did not appreciate the task.

"We shouldn't speak of such dirty things," said Meng Yao, visibly uncomfortable.

"Did you grow up in a brothel or in the nunnery?" asked Shen Jiu mockingly.

"What's a brothel?" asked Wei Ying. He must've wanted to know where Meng Yao came from. The little brat adored his shixiong [2] to a strange degree. That made it easier for Shen Jiu to shirk his responsibility.

"How do you not know that?" asked Shen Jiu, exasperated. "There's one near the market. We've gone past it multiple times already."

"Mother, you're a grown-up, and you worked in a brothel. I think you know the material better than I do," said Meng Yao respectfully.

"I'm a lady," said Shen Jiu, using his ultimate defense. He felt ridiculous even saying it. But he'd tell any lie to get out of this conversation. "I can't speak to a boy about things like that."

"Now you choose to be a lady," mumbled Meng Yao.

"What was that?"

"Nothing."

After the problem was dealt with and Wei Ying looked appropriately traumatised, Shen Jiu returned to his lesson.

"There are several reasons a ghost can appear. More often than not the reason is that there was something wrong with the burial: the body might be lost or denied proper burial. Also, the ghosts often appear when the death is violent and unfair. Usually they have some kind of unfinished business: it might be love, revenge, regret, anything that could keep a person from moving on. If a person had suffered great injustice, they often have revenge as their unfinished business."

"Now what do you think of our ghost?" he asked the children.

"She is resentful because a great injustice was done to her and her murderer walks free," said Meng Yao.

"That's right. Why do you think she's targeting the merchant's wife, not the merchant himself?"

"She must be angry that the wife didn't tell everybody the truth," concluded Meng Yao.

"That's possible. Wei Ying, your opinion."

"Maybe she wants to scare her?"

"Why?"

"So she tells everybody. Like, do it or I'll kill you."

"That's also possible. Now let's talk about the methods of dealing with ghosts."

Shen Jiu was certain that this particular ghost wouldn't harm children. But he still had to make sure that they were prepared.

He didn't tell them about the ghost coming to him in a dream. They would panic and it was unlikely that they would understand. At first, Shen Jiu assumed that he must've accidentally let something out of the Burial Mounds.

Only after learning the full story he realised that he just chose the wrong tree to climb. That must have been a tree the merchant used to stage suicide. And he not only touched the tree several times, but spent hours meditating on his own resentment nearby, remembering the vilest episodes of his life.

The ghost must've found a kindred spirit in him. She was lucky that he couldn't make himself refuse the plea of a desperate woman.

[1]A tree growing too large and pressing against a wall represents "pressure" and stagnant energy, creating an imbalance. It could also provide a path for malevolent forces to climb into the building. return to text ↩

[2] A Chinese term meaning "senior male fellow student" or "older martial brother". return to text ↩

Chapter 7: Liberation.

"From now on, we'll have to play-act as servants," said Shen Jiu. "A-Yao, tell Wei Ying how to behave. You're responsible for him."

He was tired of being reminded of Yue Qingyuan every time he addressed Meng Yao, so A-Yao it was. The softer form of address felt disgustingly natural in his mouth. He cursed Meng Shi's body for making him doubt his own mind. He could hardly tell what was his and what was hers and that was driving him insane.

Meng Yao straightened his back, adopted an aloof face and began speaking, "Always do what you're told. Keep your head down and don't look anybody in the eye. Be quiet and unnoticeable, but if anybody sees you, don't stay idle. They need to think that you're busy. If you're not sure you can do a job well, ask me."

"Did you get all that?" asked Shen Jiu, giving the brat a stern look. "If you mess up, they could whip you."

"I think I understand everything… Wait, what does "stay idle" mean?" asked Wei Ying.

Shen Jiu sighed and gave Meng Yao an expectant look.

"To stay idle means to spend time doing nothing."

"Oh, I don't like to stay idle."

"We've noticed, A-Ying," said Meng Yao, amused. He must have been thinking of the brat's annoying inability to stay still, though Shen Jiu didn't understand what was so amusing about it. Sometimes he considered tying the brat's arms to his sides just to stop the constant fidgeting.

The next morning, Shen Jiu led his two brats to the merchant's estate. In the daylight, he could appreciate it in all its gaudy glory. Even from outside he could see an overabundance of decorations, added with no sense of style or measure. Shen Jiu had to contain a snort when he noticed a phoenix[1] among the figurines atop the lower ridge of the roof. Someone thought very highly of himself.

Xiao Fang met them at the entrance and led them to their quarters. Shen Jiu did his best to behave like a good servant, following silently and keeping his eyes downcast. The children copied him.

Shen Jiu expected to be lodged in the communal living space, but to his surprise, they were given their own room. It was small, but there was enough space for a bed, a chest, and two mats on the floor. It was rather generous lodging for servants, though it made sense considering their mission. Shen Jiu was almost glad that he'd be spending the night hunting the ghost instead of dealing with his nightmares.

Shen Jiu left his belongings in the room and waited for the boys to change into their new clothes. Xiao Fang looked as if she wanted to say something, but every time she opened her mouth, she stopped herself.

The servant clothes in the merchant's estate were much nicer than the ones from the brothel. The cotton was sturdy, its indigo color pure. The mistress clearly took good care of her staff. Despite that, Shen Jiu felt like the clothes didn't suit Meng Yao at all. He glanced at Wei Ying and noted that Meng Yao must have helped him dress: the knots were too tidy otherwise.

When they were ready, they were rushed to see the mistress of the house. Sun Peizhi's sitting room was tasteful and refined, unlike the main estate. Shen Jiu noted the abundance of peach and pink silk, and a truly exquisite painting of flying cranes. He paid particular attention to an extremely breakable-looking vase with flower motifs, mentally noting its position in relation to the ever-fidgeting Wei Ying.

"Madam, the new servants you've requested are here to receive your instructions," said Xiao Fang.

Other maids were close by, so they couldn't speak frankly. Even if Sun Peizhi sent everyone away, that would attract eavesdroppers like honey attracts bees.

"Tell me about their skills, A-Fang."

"This is Shen Shi, the one Madam Qiao suggested. Recently widowed, she was in search of employment in a respectable household. She is well educated and has some musical talent."

"Good, she may be of use to me tonight. Send her to my quarters in the evening to play for me and ease my sleep."

"As for the little ones, the eldest is called Yue Yao, Shen Shi's son."

"Your son? You'd risk…" Sun Peizhi interrupted herself after catching Shen Jiu's warning look. "I apologize, my mind wandered. What of the other child?"

"His name is Wei Ying, Shen Shi's ward. Both boys are obedient and hardworking. I'll make sure that they're of use to you, Madam."

"Good. You're dismissed. I trust you to handle the new additions to our staff appropriately."

After that, the boys were led away by an older servant, while Shen Jiu remained with Xiao Fang. She led him deeper into the innermost quarters of the estate.

"Are you sure your children will be safe here?" asked the maid quietly as they walked through an empty hallway.

"They know how to take care of themselves," lied Shen Jiu.

Xiao Fang didn't look convinced, but she said nothing more. Finally, she opened a door at the end of the hallway and led him inside. Everything became clear to him the moment he saw the crib.

"A-Hua, this is Shen Shi. She'll assist you for a few days. Her husband was a cultivator, so she might be of help," said Xiao Fang.

"Oh, thank goodness! I haven't been able to take my eyes off the young master since the incident," said the squirrely, plump woman who must have been the nanny.

"The incident?" prompted Shen Jiu.

"A few nights ago, A-Hua saw a figure in white looking down at our young master. We believe he wasn't harmed because of this," said Xiao Fang, pointing to the jade longevity bracelet [2] on the child's pudgy wrist.

"It's a family heirloom," explained A-Hua. "Our mistress wore it when she was a babe, and her nanny swore that she never fell ill."

"Such a protective charm could work," Shen Jiu mused aloud. "You used to work with our mistress's family?"

"Just like me, Li Hua has been with our mistress for years," said Xiao Fang.

"I remember her when she was only this high," said Li Hua, demonstrating the height of a small child with her hand. "Can you believe it?"

Who knew that all adults used to be children? Growth… what an unbelievable concept.

"Are there any other protective artifacts in the house?" he asked. If the merchant had a strong talisman, it would explain why the ghost had targeted his wife instead.

"Master Zhou doesn't believe in such things," said Xiao Fang. Her tone was properly poised and polite, but when she said "master", Shen Jiu noticed a spark of loathing deep in her eyes.

After that, Xiao Fang left them, and Shen Jiu had to endure Li Hua's chattiness on his own. She took care of the baby diligently, but she appeared to be utterly incapable of maintaining silence. She regaled Shen Jiu with countless boring tidbits about her young master's development, as well as some stories from her own rather dull life.

When a maid entered to clean and A-Hua immediately started talking at her instead, Shen Jiu was relieved. He hated small talk. Though he loathed children, especially helpless drooling ones, he'd rather be left alone with the infant than have to endure its nanny any longer.

Late in the evening, he was led to Sun Peizhi's bedroom. Meng Yao and Wei Ying were sweeping the floor in the hallway nearby, positioned so they could slip inside when needed. He'd asked Xiao Fang to arrange for it because he wanted the children there when the ghost came. Especially Wei Ying. He wanted to see whether the child had any special connection to the dead.

Sun Peizhi was already dressed for bed and looked at him with wide, terrified eyes from her canopy bed.

"I'm not sure I'll be able to sleep. I've been too frightened to sleep for the past two nights."

"You have nothing to worry about. I'll be here with you the whole night and won't allow you to be harmed," lied Shen Jiu. He was almost certain the ghost didn't want to actually murder Sun Peizhi, but if he was wrong, there was little he could do. Perhaps he should have considered his involvement better. If she died with him in the room, he would be in serious trouble.

He lit some incense to help her fall asleep. Then he sat down on a chair next to the bed with his qin and began to play idly. It took around eight songs for Sun Peizhi's breathing to even out in sleep. He opened the door and gestured for the brats to come inside. It'd be easier to keep watch with three pairs of eyes, and Xiao Fang had promised to make sure that no living soul would disturb her mistress's sleep that night.

The children were visibly tired, and Wei Ying couldn't sit still to save his life, so Shen Jiu had to glare him into submission multiple times when he started tugging at Meng Yao's clothes just to be annoying.

The ghost appeared without a sound or movement: one moment there was nothing, the next, a figure in white robes with wild black hair running loose was looming over Sun Peizhi's sleeping form. Shen Jiu gestured for the children to move behind the partition screen and began to play.

Usually, using the language of the qin to speak to a ghost was only conceivable for a cultivator with a golden core. However, the ghost was particularly strong, and hadn't required summoning, so it was possible for anyone who knew the language to communicate with it. And Shen Jiu knew the language very well.

"What do you want?" he said, for the boys' benefit, and played the same phrase on the qin.

The ghost turned away from the bed, noticing him for the first time. Her face was pale and waxy, and there were black bruises on her neck. To Shen Jiu's surprise, there were no signs of pregnancy or the child's spirit anywhere. Last time he dealt with a ghost of a pregnant woman, there had been a separate ghost of a child connected to her. It was a truly nasty case.

He looked at the ghost with feigned calm as she approached him and reached out her hand to touch the strings of his qin. There was blood visible under her nails.

"Save. Her," she played.

"Save her? You were strangling her every night to save her?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously. He didn't play the words, but she must have understood him without the qin.

"Needs. Leave. Dangerous." The ghost looked him right in the eyes as she played. They were black and bottomless. He'd never been this close to a ghost who wasn't trying to kill him.

"You want her to leave because it's dangerous? Was that why you approached the child?"

"Yes."

"Because he killed your child when he killed you?" Ghosts often had no logic, but Shen Jiu still felt the need to explain. "He is the heir, he wouldn't…"

"No," interrupted the ghost. "He. Did. Not. Kill. Child. I. Did."

Could it actually have been suicide? But no the evidence spoke against it… Then there was only one option.

"You got rid of the child?"

"Need. Not. His. Spawn." The ghost looked disgusted. Shen Jiu couldn't blame her, he would definitely do the same in her shoes.

"But you still think that a child is in danger? Why?"

"He. Needs. Not. Reason. Kill. Blood. Thirsty. Hunted. Like. Prey."

"He hunted you like prey?"

"Smiling. Laughing. Monster."

Her face twisted in rage, and a wide crack appeared on the wooden floor with a loud sound, waking Sun Peizhi. The woman stared at the ghost in horror.

"I'm sorry. I'm so sorry," she started wailing.

The ghost gave her a sad look. "No. Sorry. Did. No. Wrong. Kind."

"She says you don't need to be sorry. You did her no wrong and you were very kind to her," translated Shen Jiu. "From what I can determine, she was trying to force you to take your child and leave because she believes her murderer will kill you next. She said that he didn't kill her to keep her silent. He killed her simply because he wanted to and because he knew he could get away with it. He's the type of monster who gets pleasure from others' pain."

"You. Understand." The ghost played.

"I do," said Shen Jiu sincerely. He knew better than most. "But I don't understand why you won't take revenge on him directly. You're powerful enough."

"Can. Not."

"Why? Does he have a protective talisman?"

"No. Just. Can. Not."

"You are strong enough to leave bruises. You can do anything you want to him and he won't be able to stop you."

"I can't!" screeched the ghost in her own voice. Shen Jiu could feel resentment around him. It was so thick one could drown in it.

"She’s scared," said Wei Ying suddenly. Shen Jiu had forgotten about the children. "She’s scared of the bad man, so she won’t go to him."

Was it that simple? How could Shen Jiu miss something so simple? Hadn’t he been too afraid to do anything to Qiu Jianluo until he couldn’t take it anymore? For years, he had swallowed his pain and humiliation, too afraid to fight back. And when he did fight back, he had realised that he could have freed himself long time ago.

He looked into the ghost’s eyes and began to recall his own fear and resentment, extending it out from his own body as if offering a hand. She must have reached back because suddenly he was assaulted by flashes of terror, and laughter, and running away in the dark, and pain, and pain, and pain…

He put all his mental fortitude into recalling the look on Qiu Jianluo’s face when he stabbed him. The power circling through his body. The heat of the fire. The warmth of the blood on his face. With all that resentment circling through him, he could have tried raising the dead, but instead he poured it all back into the ghost. She needed it more than he did.

When he was done, the ghost was gone.

[Profound emotional connection achieved. +100 L points]

Shen Jiu gritted his teeth, he had enough of that. "Don’t let me hear you without an important reason or I swear…"

[Silent Mode Enabled. To hear the System the User has to address it directly.]

"Is it over?" asked Sun Peizhi.

"I believe so," said Shen Jiu. "We’ll have to remain attentive for several days in case she comes back."

"Thank you. If this works, I’ll give you anything you wish for, I swear!"

"We’ll discuss payment once we are sure the problem is dealt with. Now, I must take the children to bed, they’ve stayed up long enough."

"Of course, of course. Go rest. Please, tell Xiao Fang to come in when you leave, I don’t want to be alone."

They didn’t have to look for the maid, because they found her immediately, standing guard in the hallway outside her mistress’s room. Shen Jiu passed along the message and took the children to their quarters. He only managed to fall asleep in the early hours of dawn and was promptly woken by a rapid knocking on his door.

"You need to see this. Get dressed," ordered Xiao Fang. She appeared to be unsettled.

After he got dressed, Shen Jiu was all but dragged outside. He asked her what she wanted to show him, but Xiao Fang refused to say, explaining that she had only heard people talking and needed to see it for herself.

She walked with him to the same shrine where he had first met Sun Peizhi. There on the branch of the ancient tree, a body was hanging, the inscription "Prayers answered" right underneath the dead man’s feet. Shen Jiu didn’t recognize the man, but from the rich clothing and the manner of death, he could guess.

"Is that Master Zhou?"

Xiao Fang nodded, her eyes wide. Shen Jiu had to suppress a satisfied smile.

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[1] A symbol of the empress and imperial virtue. Its use was traditionally restricted to the imperial family. A merchant using it as a roof decoration is a major breach of social custom, seen as arrogant and tasteless social climbing return to text ↩

[2] A specific type of charm meant to protect the wearer, especially children, from illness and harm, ensuring a long life. return to text ↩

Chapter 8: Bittersweet.

After three years in Yiling, Shen Jiu could say he felt at home there. The quaint run-down town looked nothing like Cang Qiong Mountain, yet there was something vaguely familiar about it. He attributed the feeling to stability, something he had rarely gotten to enjoy. As he walked through the populous market, wearing flowing silk robes in his favorite shades of green, Shen Jiu idly listened to the usual rumors.

"One day she arrives in Yiling, and the next she's living as the second mistress Zhou, treated like family."

"I think she is a sorceress[1]! Li-jie saw her entering the forest at night with a small child in tow. Who knows what demonic rituals she was practicing there!"

"Poor Madam Zhou must be enchanted!"

"Best to stay away from the sorceress!"

Shen Jiu smirked. A sorceress - that was a new one. A few years back, the rumor was that he was blackmailing poor, widowed Madam Zhou. Then he had stopped wearing his mourning garb, and they immediately switched to the theory that he was a huli jing[2].

This particular theory had been so widely spread that even the late Master Zhou's brother believed it, hiring a rogue cultivator to investigate. That man ended up getting stabbed. He was lucky Shen Jiu didn't aim for anything vital, considering that he had found a strange man in his room in the middle of the night.

Shen Jiu walked into the bookshop. The smell of old paper and ink brought back memories of long, sleepless nights in the library of Qing Jing Peak. He went through the narrow, dimly lit room toward the high wooden counter.

"I'm here for my order," said Shen Jiu.

The wrinkly, half-blind shopkeeper's mouth twitched in the insincere attempt at a smile, "Ah, Madam Yue, you are always a pleasant sight to behold!"

They had taken to calling Shen Jiu Madam Yue. It had taken him months to train himself not to flinch at the name.

Shen Jiu looked at the shopkeeper, silently unimpressed.

"My order?" he repeated.

"It's in the back room, as usual," said the bookkeeper as he opened the door behind him.

"If it's a fraud, as usual…" said Shen Jiu threateningly, allowing the bookkeeper to draw his own conclusions.

"This one is genuine, I swear! The sect leader of the Yao clan has a gambling addiction..."

"I don't need the details. Just give me the book, and I'll be the one to judge whether it's genuine or not."

"Of course, of course, please take a look," he said as he took out a wooden box and handed it to Shen Jiu. He opened the box and took out the book bound in black leather. The cover was sturdy, the quality clearly high, but it was the contents that truly mattered.

He opened the book and started reading. He turned a few pages and took a good look at the drawings. There was no way it was an actual technique. Anyone attempting it would certainly die of qi deviation. Unless they were Luo Binghe, the little beast had spirit veins of steel or he'd be long dead.

For a second, he wondered whether his death by qi deviation was a karmic response to giving the little beast a faulty cultivation manual. He banished the thought.

"Why are you wasting my time with this? It's not even a good fake!"

"Perhaps Madam Yue might make a few suggestions…" started the bookkeeper, not ashamed at all.

"I'm not going to teach you how to make better forgeries! If you waste my time with one more fake, I'll go to the magistrate."

"Oh, Madam Yue, we both know you would rather avoid the magistrate's attention."

"Are you threatening me?" asked Shen Jiu coldly. He felt waves of resentment rising. If he put it to use, he could summon a low-level ghost to torment the brazen fool into insanity.

"Of course not! No threats here, not for one of my most treasured clients! I actually have a gift as a sign of appreciation for your patronage," he said, handing Shen Jiu a thin booklet.

Shen Jiu snatched it quickly. Just as he suspected, it was the next three chapters of "Green Plum, Black Despair[3]." The love novel about childhood sweethearts, separated by circumstances and reunited ten years later, it was surprisingly captivating.

The last chapter Shen Jiu had read ended when the love interest was about to admit why he hadn't come back for the protagonist. The rotten bastard had better have a good excuse, or Shen Jiu would tear him to pieces when discussing it with Sun Peizhi. She was the one who had introduced him to the story and was always delighted to discuss it with him.

He returned to the estate late in the afternoon and immediately stumbled upon the suspiciously smiling brat in the hallway.

"Wei Ying, what's behind your back?" he asked threateningly.

The brat kept smiling at him. "Nothing, Shizun!"

"You dare lie?" hissed Shen Jiu, grabbing the brat by the arm. The boy's grip must have become loose, and the giant toad jumped right onto the pale limestone floor. Shen Jiu loathed children.

"Get this creature out of here, or I swear this time I'll actually make you sleep with the dogs."

"Of course, Shizun! Right away, Shizun!" said the brat. Then he gave chase to the toad as it started to hop away.

"And clean your face! You look like a vagrant!"

Shen Jiu shook his head. This brat was such a headache, it was a miracle Shen Jiu hadn't murdered him yet.

After that, he went to his chambers, locked the door, and finally read the chapters. The truth was so annoying he wanted to put his hands through the pages and shake that damn Ling Sheng, until his brain started working. The idiot had a good explanation this whole time and had made poor Xiao Yu suffer for nothing. She would have forgiven him immediately if only he'd told her. And now she was betrothed to another!

Shen Jiu wanted to throw the chapters into the fireplace, but he had to give them to Sun Peizhi first. He did it right before supper.

"Judging from your face, they're good," she said, amused.

"Just be grateful I didn't burn them," he huffed.

"Oh, they must be excellent! I can't wait," she said.

They sat down in their usual places. They had been eating together for three years already, and it had become a familiar routine. Shen Jiu didn't even have to give Meng Yao a pointed look, for the child to correct Wei Ying's way of holding chopsticks. Even after three years the brat still forgot. If Shen Jiu had been the one teaching him, he would have already poured his supper onto his head.

Once the chopsticks were held correctly, Shen Jiu finally noticed a bruise on Meng Yao's cheek. He finished eating quietly, not wanting to break his own rule, not when he had taught even Wei Ying to remain quiet while eating. But he did take the boy aside immediately after dinner.

"Who did this?" he asked sharply, turning Meng Yao's face to get a better look at the bruise. Definitely a punch.

"It was a training incident."

"Should I drag Wei Ying here and interrogate him?"

"I was training on my own," said Meng Yao, clinging to his lie stubbornly.

"And you punched yourself? Give me the name! I'll make sure to make their life difficult."

"I hit him first, so you can’t!"

"You hit somebody?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously. Despite his future crimes, Meng Yao wasn’t a violent person. Usually he was the type to stop fights with reasonable words. Shen Jiu couldn’t even imagine him punching someone.

"They deserved it."

"What did they say?"

"How do you know they said something?"

"Do you think me stupid? You wouldn’t punch somebody without a reason, so I repeat: what did they say?"

"They said that you were a seductress preying on Madam Zhou," said Meng Yao, clearly uncomfortable with the rumours.

"That’s it? Not something you’d hit a person over."

"He also called you a bad word," hissed Meng Yao. Remembering the incident clearly fanned the embers of his anger.

"What was it? A huli jing, a sorceress, a beast [4], a whore…"

"Mother!" Meng Yao’s mouth dropped open in indignation.

"Who cares what they say? They can’t do anything but run their mouths, so let them."

"Don’t you care about your reputation?"

"What reputation? My reputation was ruined years ago. Why should I bother with it? Imagine what they’d say about me if they knew the truth."

"Don’t you understand that a bad reputation can get you killed?"

What a precocious brat Meng Yao was! Shen Jiu wasn’t looking forward to arguing with him once he grew up.

"It won’t come to that anytime soon. But I think we’ll have to leave in a month or two anyway. Sun Peizhi can’t have such rumours about her, not when her husband’s brother is trying to steal the estate."

"Are you going to the Burial Mounds tonight?" asked Meng Yao as Shen Jiu was ready to end the conversation.

"Did Wei Ying tell you? Curse his yappy mouth! Can’t keep a secret to save his life!"

"He didn’t tell me, but I could tell. He can’t hide anything from me. I want to go with you."

"I already told you, it’s too dangerous. I don’t want to ruin your cultivation with an untested method!"

Shen Jiu had seen it from his own experience. For three years, he’d been working on establishing his Foundation. Even with his faulty spirit veins, he should have reached his goal a year ago, but something was setting him back. It made sense that practicing demonic cultivation, even in his chaotic and unskilled way, was not good for one’s Foundation.

"But you let Wei Ying go. Isn’t it going to ruin his cultivation?"

Shen Jiu scoffed.

"What do I care about his cultivation? I need a test subject, and he is willing."

"You call yourself his Shizun! You should care about his cultivation!"

"Don’t lecture me. I can do whatever I want with him."

"If he comes, I’ll come too. If you don’t take me, I’ll follow you. If you drag me back, I’ll return."

"Then I’ll lock you up and break your legs!"

After having said that, Shen Jiu felt sick.

He turned around and rushed to his quarters, where he emptied his stomach. He didn’t go to the Burial Mounds that night. When Wei Ying came to his door, he sent the brat away without even opening the door. He couldn’t trust himself not to do something he’d regret later.

He didn’t sleep either. Choked by nightmares of locked doors, he ached for Meng Yao’s soothing presence, but was too proud to beg for his company after their fight.

The next day, Meng Yao came to his room first thing in the morning.

"I’m sorry I argued with you yesterday, Mother. Please forgive me," he blurted out as soon as Shen Jiu opened the door.

"Come in," he ordered, letting the child come inside. "Make us some tea. There are things we need to discuss."

The boy prepared and poured tea, perfectly poised, just like Shen Jiu had taught him. Looking at his neat appearance - which was befitting of a noble - and precise movements, Shen Jiu was satisfied. It was just like looking at one of the paintings he had made. He couldn’t stay mad at Meng Yao.

"Passable," said Shen Jiu after drinking a small mouthful of perfectly brewed tea. It was an expensive sort, as Sun Peizhi didn’t spare any expense on their comforts.

"I want to apologise once more…" started Meng Yao, keeping his eyes low.

"Don’t. Do you actually think that you are in the wrong?"

"Of course I was in the wrong. Mother is an adult and knows better, so I should be filial and obey."

"You get better at lying as you grow up, but I can still tell."

"I’m sorry…"

"Stop. You see, I never knew my parents, so I don’t understand the importance of being filial. Should I try to be filial to parents who likely sold me for a few bags of rice? If I got to meet them, I’d curse and spit at them, they don’t deserve anything different."

That was something he had planned to say at some point, because, from what he could remember, being filial was the boy’s damnation. He needed to stop this nonsense before it could harm Meng Yao.

"But Mother, you’re different! You did so much for me!"

"If I’m wrong, I’m wrong. My being your mother doesn’t change anything. I might be cross with you for being difficult, but I’d still respect you more than if you blindly obeyed with no thoughts of your own."

"So you admit that you were in the wrong?" asked Meng Yao sharply. Shen Jiu rarely enjoyed seeing the boy’s edges, and that always felt like one of his own brush strokes.

"No, but I think it’s time we stopped visiting the Burial Mounds altogether. It is dangerous, and it gets in the way of orthodox cultivation, slowing my progress. Recently I’ve had a breakthrough, so now I can do a little more with my cultivation than simply keep my body healthy."

He demonstrated a levitating coin to Meng Yao. Something that he could do as a child in his original body had taken him three years of daily training to achieve, and he still couldn’t maintain it for long.

"It’s better for the ghost path to remain something I can use in case of emergency," continued Shen Jiu. "I’ll tell Wei Ying to do the same. That boy has no sense and would get himself tried as a heretic if he is left to his own devices."

"If you don’t take him to the Burial Mounds, he’ll forget all about the ghost path altogether and focus on something else. I just hope it won’t be toads."

"What about toads?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously.

"The person I punched yesterday might have found his bed occupied by toads last night."

"Just don’t let him get caught. If he does, I’ll make him kneel outside for the night."

"Of course, Mother. We know better than to get caught."

Their morning was interrupted by the arrival of Xiao Fang.

"Madam Yue, a cultivator arrived this morning. He asked for a meeting with you."

"What color was he wearing?"

"Purple."

It was right about time. The brat's ninth birthday had been months ago.

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[1] Yaonu - demoness/sorceress. A classic, powerful term of abuse and fear for a woman believed to possess malevolent supernatural powers or a dangerously seductive nature. It implies she is not just a practitioner of magic but is inherently unnatural, evil, and a threat to the social and cosmic order. return to text ↩

[2] A mythical fox spirit from Chinese folklore known for shapeshifting, often into beautiful women to seduce human men and drain their life force (yang energy). In this context, the label is a severe insult implying Shen Jiu's influence over Madam Zhou is unnatural. It is more specific than "sorceress", but is generally considered a lesser insult than yaonu, which implies something along the lines of "evil incarnate". So, the rumors are escalating dangerously.return to text ↩

[3] Green Plum, Black Despair (青梅绝境, Qīngméi Juéjìng). "Green plum" is a classic metaphor for childhood sweethearts. "Black despair" (literally "hopeless situation") signals the angsty, melodramatic conflicts. Basically, a cheesy name I spend too much time thinking of.return to text ↩

[4] Chusheng - a severe insult meaning someone is subhuman, vile, immoral, and no better than livestock. And yes, that's the word Shen Jiu used to call Luo Binghe. return to text ↩

On filial piety.

It's important to note that Shen Jiu's attitude toward filial piety is extremely radical by the standards of Ancient China. The idea was that the children were supposed to obey their parents without question, so suggesting anything less than that would shock people greatly. Shen Jiu did a modern alternative of suggesting his son call him by the first name.

Chapter 9: Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu took his fan from its case on the dressing table. It was his only fan, made of delicate white silk with an old peach tree in bloom painted on it. It was a high-quality piece and also a present, so Shen Jiu took it out only on special occasions. He opened the fan and glanced at the pink blossoms. Only he and Sun Peizhi understood the meaning.

He remembered telling her to get rid of the old peach tree in her courtyard, because it got too close to the wall and was ruining the Feng Shui of the place. Sun Peizhi refused, paying a small fortune to a Feng Shui master, who made a stone path between the tree and the wall and recommended trimming the branches regularly.

Shen Jiu grumbled that she was wasting resources. Then he noticed that the area around the tree became particularly pleasant and the energy flow was perfect for meditation. It took him months to overcome his pride and ask permission to use the place for meditation. The fan was supposed to remind him that taking a more difficult path could be more rewarding.

After making sure that he looked respectable, Shen Jiu walked to the garden pavilion hidden in the bamboo grove. Xiao Fang had said she sent the cultivator in purple to wait there. The walk through the bamboo reminded him of Qing Jing peak and soothed his worries a bit. He was almost certain that this was about Wei Ying, and he was ready for the conversation.

When he first took the boy in, he'd expected to hand him over as soon as the Jiangs turned up. He didn't need another disciple, and it was a convenient way to get rid of the boy as soon as he stopped being useful. However, after teaching the brat for three years, he wasn't eager to give him away at all. He didn't house train the brat for somebody else to enjoy the fruits of his labour.

He opened the door with force, expecting to argue for the boy to remain with him. If pressed, he could even fake cry, he had experience with that. Instead, Shen Jiu was frozen, startled by a familiar face. Just for a second he thought that it was Yue Qingyuan in front of him. He realised his mistake in a few moments: the man's nose was a bit straighter, his lips thinner, his skin lighter. But still, the man looked remarkably alike to Shen Jiu's former Sect Leader.

They stared at each other in silent shock too long for it to be appropriate.

"I apologize…" started Shen Jiu.

"There is no need," interrupted the man. He even sounded like Yue Qingyuan.

"You just…"

"It's a strange, but you…" said the man at the same time.

"Look like a person I used to know," they said together.

Huh? That was unexpected. Who could Shen Jiu even remind him of? Was it possible that he knew Meng Shi? But the System would say something.

This whole conversation was embarrassing. Shen Jiu covered his face with his fan, trying to keep himself together. He had come prepared for a debate but instead stumbled into some tasteless theater show.

"I should introduce myself," said the man, visibly flustered. "My name is Jiang Fengmian."

"This one is Shen Shi. And what could the leader of one of the five great sects want from this humble widow?"

"A year ago I found out about my old friends's death. We lost contact long ago, so I couldn't even pinpoint where they were staying. But I knew they had a child, and I couldn't give up if there was a chance he was left alone. I've gone to almost every town in Yunmeng till I came here."

"Were you able to find this child?" asked Shen Jiu, pretending that he had no idea who the child in question was.

"I was. In fact, I've been told that Wei Ying is now in your care."

"Who told you that?" asked Shen Jiu. He did his best to hide the fact that he took in the street rat, so how did Jiang Fengmian find out?

"The innkeeper from the Drunken Poet's Rest told me. You see, Wei Ying's parents were staying at that inn, which he was eager to tell me about as soon as I mentioned the reward. I was quite cross with him for throwing a five-year-old child out when his parents failed to return, but he was quick to assure me that the boy was in good hands."

That rat bastard. His beady eyes noticed everything. This whole time he just kept the cards close to his chest waiting for a good opportunity. At least he didn't seem to have regaled the sect leader with any of the rumours about Shen Shi and her demonic ways.

"He still spent at least eight months on the streets," said Shen Jiu. "Which could be avoided if the man had the insight to contact the nearest cultivation sect."

"Thank you for taking such care of Wei Ying. I don't know what I'd do if something happened to him," said Jiang Fengmian with a sincere smile.

At least unlike Yue Qi he bothered to come for the brat, even if he was late. Shen Jiu bit the inside of his cheek to keep a neutral face.

"I have a son around his age. And both of them have cultivation potential so I have had them train together. It was good for my Yue Yao to have a little brother to spoil."

He made sure to mention the familiar relationship between the two. If the man wanted to take the brat away, he'd have to watch two brats cry their hearts out.

"I apologise if I'm being presumptuous, but are you a cultivator?"

"Barely. My late husband was a cultivator, but he died before he could teach me much. I taught the boys everything I could, but there was only so much I could do."

Perhaps if he couldn't keep Wei Ying he could at least get some manuals in exchange for the brat. He would still rather keep his disciple. Shen Jiu didn't like giving away things he considered his.

"This is wonderful! I admit I was going to offer to accept Wei Ying into my sect, but I was worried that he wouldn't want to be separated from his new family. However, if you and your son wish to study cultivation, I'm happy to invite you as my personal guests."

That was too generous of an offer. Though it did sound like something Yue Qingyuan would suggest.

"Wouldn't your wife mind?" asked Shen Jiu, remembering the plot of the book. He could imagine the woman's fury at such house guests. She was mad enough when it was only one brat.

"She'll understand," said the man, but his smile tightened at the edges, indicating that she'd definitely throw a fit. Shen Jiu would certainly do exactly that in her position.

"Perhaps it would be better if I had a reason to stay at your sect," said Shen Jiu, his mind reeling. He hadn't considered this opportunity before but it was a good way to solve most of his current problems: Sun Peizhi would be free of the rumours, they'd be able to maintain their lifestyle, Wei Ying would remain in his sphere of influence and, the best thing of all, they'd be able to use the Jiang clan's library. Shen Jiu had had enough of fake manuals.

"I suppose I could offer you the position of a teacher for my children. The old one had recently retired and we've yet to hire a new one. Though I'd have to warn you that my wife might insist on overseeing lessons."

"This would be perfect," said Shen Jiu. He definitely didn't want to pose as a servant, but without a reason for his presence there would certainly be rumours about him being Jiang Fengmian's lover. The position of teacher would be the best possible solution.

Sun Peizhi insisted on throwing a farewell banquet for them. Shen Jiu had a suspicion that she only did so because she was happy she was allowed to stop wearing mourning clothes. He supposed it was also not bad for her reputation to have a cultivator retinue as guests. At least that would stop all the rumors about her being enchanted.

The servants did their best to prepare the main courtyard for the occasion. Considering the short notice and the lack of guests in the last three years, they did a stellar job. The garden had never looked that good in Shen Jiu's memory. They even hired a musician with a pipa.

Shen Jiu had to introduce Sun Peizhi to Jiang Fengmian as soon as the Jiang delegation arrived. The lady comported herself with grace, gaining the approving nod from her father who was among the guests. The man did not approve of his daughter's friendship with a nameless widow, but agreed to come as soon as he heard that Jiang Fengmian would be attending.

The pleasantries were mind-numbingly boring. Shen Jiu's mind had drifted away when the cultivator decided to ask how the two of them had met. Shen Jiu gave Sun Peizhi a significant look: he'd told her already that she couldn't tell any cultivator about what had happened with the ghost.

"Madam Yue was looking for her sister, so she was making inquiries. I didn't have the pleasure of knowing her distinguished sister, but I have been impressed by Madam Yue's skills and intelligence. My husband died soon after, so she offered her support as a fellow widow."

"You have a sister?" asked Jiang Fengmian. "Were you able to find her?"

Was he looking for holes in his backstory? It was surprisingly astute of him.

"Unfortunately, we were separated when we were both very young. I heard rumors that she was in Yiling, but they must've been wrong."

After that they finally sat down to eat. For some reason, Sun Peizhi kept giving him strange looks through the whole banquet. He had no idea what it could be about.

Once they were done with the meal, Shen Jiu took the opportunity to introduce the children to Jiang Fengmian. Meng Yao was perfectly poised as usual, behaving like an heir of a cultivation sect. Shen Jiu was pleased with him. Meanwhile, Wei Ying hid behind Shen Jiu's back as if he was three years old.

"What's the matter with you?" hissed Shen Jiu when he had enough.

"I don't want to go to the Yunmeng Jiang Sect! I want to stay with Shizun and Yao-ge," wailed the brat.

Shen Jiu turned around abruptly to speak to Wei Ying face to face.

"What nonsense are you crying about?"

"But Yao-ge said that the Jiangs came to take me to their sect!" he was all snot and tears. It was disgusting.

"I think there's a misunderstanding here," said Jiang Fengmian as he stepped closer to face Wei Ying shoulder to shoulder with Shen Jiu. "Your family will come with you to the sect, so you won't be separated."

"Really? Shizun, is that true?" asked Wei Ying eagerly.

"Now you show me respect? Where are your manners? You are speaking to a sect leader! What will people think of my teachings, if you shame me with such behaviour?"

Shen Jiu took a handkerchief out of his sleeve and rubbed the snot and tears off the brat's face with force. Wei Ying yelped pathetically but stood still.

"Sorry, Shizun," said the boy once his face was clean then he introduced himself to Jiang Fengmian properly.

The sect leader let out a good-natured laugh. "You're a lot like your mother."

"You knew my mother?"

"And your father as well. They were good friends of mine."

After that the boy occupied most of the sect leader's attention, asking for more stories about his parents. Shen Jiu took the opportunity to take Meng Yao aside.

"What did you tell Wei Ying?" asked Shen Jiu sharply.

"The same thing you told me."

"Then why did he think we were going to give him away?"

"He must've misunderstood me."

"Don't lie to me if you're going to be this transparent. Now, explain."

"It's better if they know that he will still be our family, not theirs," huffed Meng Yao.

"He's not our family."

"He's my little brother and your student."

"You're being ridiculous," scoffed Shen Jiu and shook his head.

Once the guests left, Shen Jiu wanted to go back to his room. However, Sun Peizhi insisted on walking him back.

"It will be lonely without you and the children," she said wistfully.

"You should invite your Aunt to stay with you. She'll help with Second Master Zhou."

"I love my aunt, but it won't be the same."

"With all the rumors, it was just a matter of time."

"Why didn't you tell me you had a secret lover?"

"A secret lover?!" Shen Jiu choked on his own spit.

"It's clear as day that you and Sect Leader Jiang have history."

"There's no history! I met him yesterday!"

"That can't be! Not with the way you looked at him, and not with the way he looked at you."

"You've read too many romance novels. Good night!"

He slammed the door shut behind him. Shen Jiu could hear Sun Peizhi's laughter behind the door. She must've been making things up just to make fun of him. Devious woman!

They had finished packing that evening so they could set off in the early morning. Sun Peizhi had come to see them off personally.

"Make sure to write," she said. "And know that you'll always be welcome here."

"Thank you," said Shen Jiu sincerely. She didn't have to go out of her way, providing them with every comfort for three years. Sun Peizhi could've given him her jewellery and sent them on their way, instead she accepted them as part of her family. He couldn't remember the last time a person did so much for him asking for nothing in return.

"Are you ready?" asked Jiang Fengmian when Shen Jiu approached him. "I've asked my disciples to carry the boys and your luggage. I'll take you personally if you don't mind."

Shen Jiu frowned at him. He did very much mind. Going by sword was much faster than taking a carriage, but considering the pathetic state of his cultivation he'd have to ride with someone. All the Jiang disciples were men, so if he had to choose with whom he'd have to remain in prolonged contact with…

"You honor me, Sect Leader."

He still got tense as soon as he stepped on the sword and Jiang Fengmian put his hand on his waist.

"Is everything alright?" asked the Yue Qingyuan look-alike. Perhaps if he pretended…

"This one doesn't enjoy being touched."

"Would it be better if you stood behind me and took hold of my robes?" asked the man.

"I suppose so," said Shen Jiu and changed his position. It was much better this way.

"Just make sure to hold tight. Have you ever flown by sword before?"

He used to love flying. It always made him feel unburdened. Now he felt like a bird with clipped wings.

"I used to fly quite often, but it was a long time ago."

"I hope you won't get startled then," said the sect leader and set off. Shen Jiu did not get startled in the slightest. He wasn't a child. Though he did take a very tight hold of Jiang Fengmian's clothes. He was simply being practical. That's all.

It had been a while since Shen Jiu had seen the world from up high. He'd almost forgotten how freeing it was, though before he didn't have such trouble keeping himself warm. He put all the qi he had to the task, and still found himself shivering by the end of their journey. He'd

have to pace himself for a few days, conserving qi. If he didn't do that, he would fall ill for sure.

The Lotus Pier was a chaotic place. Its entrance was right by the docks, and Shen Jiu could hear the noise even from up high. Some children were pointing at them. He'd hoped that there weren't going to be any rumors that soon.

They landed near the training ground and were quickly surrounded by curious brats in purple. Shen Jiu ignored them and walked to check on Meng Yao. His nose was red and cold to the touch.

"Did you use the warming techniques?" he asked.

"Yes, Mother."

"Shizun, Shizun, will we learn how to fly on swords?! How high can you fly anyway? Is there a limit? Could a good cultivator touch the sun or the moon?" asked Wei Ying, jumping around like a drunk squirrel.

"Restrain yourself. We're guests here," hissed Shen Jiu.

"Don't worry about it," said Jiang Fengmian. "It's alright if…"

"Jiang Fengmian," interrupted a cold female voice. "Are you going to introduce me to your guests?"

Shen Jiu turned his head and froze. He couldn't believe his eyes.

The tall imposing woman in rich purple robes was approaching them. Her eyes, her nose, her mouth… it was just as if Shen Jiu's old body had a twin sister.

"Am I going insane?" he thought. "System, is that your doing?"

[Character appearances weren't changed]

"Then why on earth do they look like Yue Qingyuan and me?"

[Not enough Lore points to unlock this information]

"San-niang, I've found Wei Changze's son."

"I can see that. He looks just like his mother. What about the other guest?"

She was trying to burn a hole in Shen Jiu's face with her eyes alone. He had no idea why she would dislike him that strongly before she even knew who he was.

"Madam Yue is a widow from Yiling. She has been kind enough to take Wei Ying in and teach him the basics of cultivation. I've been impressed by her talents in the four arts so I invited her as a new teacher for A-Cheng and A-Li."

"I was going to hire a new teacher for them. It’s my responsibility as their mother."

"I don’t doubt your competence. Madam Yue is willing and competent, her good character without doubt. And this way Wei Ying wouldn’t have to be separated with his family."

"All for her son, I see! Of course, you’d go out of your way to accommodate him!"

"Madam Yu, you…" started Jiang Fengmian. He looked like a sad dog. The whole exchange seemed uncomfortably familiar.

"We’ll talk of it later," huffed the woman and left.

"Don’t pay her any mind. She’s all words," said Jiang Fengmian. "I’ll arrange for you to meet the children. Lin Min, can you take our guests to the green sitting room?"

"Is Madam Yu going to give us trouble?" asked Meng Yao quietly once they were seated.

"Don’t worry about it. I’ll deal with her if needed. Just remember that if she tries to punish you, you should call for me."

"Should we keep our eyes down and do what we are told?" asked Wei Ying.

Shen Jiu scoffed. Not on his watch.

"No, you’re not just the guest disciples of the Jiang clan. You’re my disciples. I won’t have you treated like servants."

Chapter 10: Attempt the Impossible.

When Jiang Fengmian finally came into the sitting room, he was followed by his children. Shen Jiu made a move to stand up but the Sect Leader gestured for him to remain seated.

Jiang Yanli, a tall and graceful young lady, held herself with poise and propriety that could compare to Meng Yao's. Her clothes were expensive but lacking any adornments other than the clarity bell attached to her belt and pink silk flowers pinned to her hair. Shen Jiu tried to recall anything about her that wasn't connected to her death and failed.

In contrast, her brother looked rumpled and had a small grass stain on his knee. His father must've snatched him while the boy was playing outside. If Wei Ying dared to meet guests, dressed like that, Shen Jiu would make him kneel till midnight. It was surprising that Jiang Fengmian didn't make his heir change before their meeting. Did he care so little that he didn't even notice? The Young Master Jiang tried to maintain the look of polite indifference, but his bright eyes were inevitably drawn to Wei Ying and Meng Yao.

"Madam Shen, we are grateful to you for agreeing to take the burden of educating my son and daughter," said Jiang Fengmian.

He made the boy come forward by pushing him gently. The child fumbled for a second but then bowed politely.

"This is my son Jiang Cheng. He's nine years old and has learned the basics of reading and calligraphy."

Shen Jiu would've liked a more detailed description of the boy's skills. He dreaded having to assess the child's capabilities himself. It was a tedious task which often ended with a student's tears.

Next, Jiang Fengmian gestured to his daughter to come forward. The girl obeyed before he even finished the gesture.

"This is my daughter, Jiang Yanli. She's twelve and has received the proper education for her age. We hope that with your help both of them will further excel in their education."

Unfortunately, Shen Jiu had no idea what was considered proper education for a twelve-year-old daughter of a sect leader in this world. If it were similar to the education the young mistresses in his world got, he'd have a lot of gaps to fill.

Shen Jiu would have to ask for more details when the formalities were over. For now he was forced to accept tea from both of his new students.

"A-Li, A-Cheng, this is Yue Yao and Wei Ying. Tomorrow they'll be formally accepted as our guest disciples. As you're close in age, I hope you'll help them settle in," said Jiang Fengmian once the formal part was over.

"Do you want to see my dogs after?" asked Jiang Cheng eagerly, looking at Wei Ying.

"D-dogs?" Wei Ying flinched, moving closer to Meng Yao.

"Unfortunately, A-Ying is scared of dogs, so it would be better to avoid them for now," said Meng Yao diplomatically.

"Perhaps it's better to send the dogs away," started Jiang Fengmian.

"Send them away? You can't send them away!"

"This is ridiculous," huffed Shen Jiu. "If he were afraid of the dark, would you assign a servant with a torch to him? He'll learn how to tolerate the animals."

"But Shizun…" started Wei Ying.

If Shen Jiu had to tolerate being around men every day, the boy could damned well learn how to walk past a dog without making a scene.

"I'm not making you play with them but you'll have to tolerate being in the same room with a dog. What are you going to do when you are grown? Are you going to make a fool of yourself every time you see a stray?"

"Yao-ge will make the dogs leave! He promised me," said the child stubbornly.

"Did he now?"

Shen Jiu would have to talk to Meng Yao about coddling the brat. He had to understand that such an attitude didn't help in the long run.

"A-Ying, I won't always be with you, you know it," said Meng Yao quickly, having noticed Shen Jiu's displeasure. "Why don't we try taking a look at those dogs from afar?"

"A-Cheng's dogs are very well behaved," said Jiang Yanli soothingly. "And they are still rather small. You'd be quite safe watching them from afar."

"Okay, but I won't come close," conceded Wei Ying.

"A-Cheng, A-Li, could you show Wei Ying and Yue Yao around the Lotus Pier?" asked Jiang Fengmian. "They'll be taking dinner with us today."

"If you're so scared of my dogs, I could show you the pond I guess," said Jiang Cheng. "There are baby frogs in there."

"Really? Please, show me," said Wei Ying excitedly.

As the children filed out of the room, Shen Jiu noticed Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli exchange amused smiles. They seemed to enjoy their role of babysitters.

"Would you like me to show you the classroom or would you rather go straight to your lodgings?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

"The classroom first, and I would also love to see the library if you don't mind," said Shen Jiu quickly.

"Of course."

The classroom was situated in a separate pavilion on the river bank. It was quiet and spacious. Shen Jiu ran his hand over the rosewood teachers' desk, enjoying the smooth feeling of the lacquered surface. It looked brand new.

He studied the objects lying on the table: an ink-stone carved with lotuses, calligraphy brushes, sharp as needles, with their handles made of aged bamboo, and ivory paper with an almost silky sheen. The Jiangs spared no expense.

There were three tables for the students and Shen Jiu slowed down in front of them, thinking of logistics.

"I'll order the servants to bring one more table," said Jiang Fengmian.

So, he expected Shen Jiu to teach not only his children but Wei Ying and Meng Yao as well. It was good to know. Shen Jiu didn't dare suggest something like that, in case it could be taken as an insult, but it suited his purposes well.

"It would also be nice to have a weiqi board or better yet two of them," suggested Shen Jiu.

"Everything you need."

His generosity, combined with that face… that was a dangerous combination.

After that Shen Jiu was taken to the library, which was a bit disappointing. Of course, he would be happy to see any library after spending three years without access to one, but he couldn't help but notice that it fell short in comparison to the library of Qing Jing Peak. A two-story building not far from the classroom, it appeared grander than it was on the inside. Even at first glance he could tell that the shelves were sparsely filled.

Unfortunately, they didn't linger in the library, though Jiang Fengmian did introduce Shen Jiu to the librarian and extended his invitation to take any books at any time. Perhaps the quality would overshadow the quantity, though Shen Jiu doubted that it would be the case here.

Their last stop was the Quiet Lotus Pavilion, which would be the place where Shen Jiu and his two brats would be staying. It was a quiet place with its own courtyard and a lotus pond. The furniture was tasteful and functional and the layout was rather convenient. There was a separate room for the children, so they would remain close without getting on his nerves. The small courtyard with a lotus pond was a perfect place for early morning meditation and late evening walks.

"My mother lived here for a few years. After she passed away, the Quiet Lotus Pavilion went to her sister, who was the one who taught A-Li and A-Cheng before you," said Jiang

Fengmian.

"What happened to her?"

"It was a misunderstanding."

Shen Jiu frowned at the lack of details. He'd have to interrogate the children. He doubted that Jiang Fengmian had it in him to dismiss his own aunt, so it had to be Yu Ziyuan's initiative.

After that Jiang Fengmian left, saying that he'd send a servant to fetch Shen Jiu before dinner, which they were apparently going to take all together. Shen Jiu wasn't looking forward to this disaster.

Finally alone, Shen Jiu decided to ask the question that was bothering him since the confrontation in the courtyard: "System, how many Lore Points do I need to find out why Jiang Fengmian and Yu Ziyuan look like Yue Qingyuan and me?"

[5000 Lore Points required.]

"And how many do I already have?"

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"Fuck eighteen generations of your ancestors[1]!" barked Shen Jiu out loud.

[This System does not possess ancestors in your meaning of the word]

"Damn you! Curse you!"

Cursing didn't help, so he threw around silk decorative pillows then stomped outside to glare into the lotus pond. As he stared at the water seething with rage, he considered possible strategies to gain more "Lore Points".

The System had told him that to gain Lore Points he needed to take part in deep emotional conversations. He remembered gaining one hundred points while sharing his emotions with the ghost, so the other 286 points he must have gained in conversations with Meng Yao and Sun Peizhi. He needed to have more such conversations and likely share more of his inner feelings, but the mere thought of it made him shudder.

Then a servant came to fetch him for dinner.

The dining room was big, but clearly wasn't the one meant for guests. Jiang Fengmian must've invited them to a family dinner to make them feel more at home. Having to see the female version of his former face twisted in an ugly scowl didn't make Shen Jiu happy even a little bit.

At least the children seemed happy. Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli were talking quietly among themselves, hiding their giggles behind their sleeves. Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng and Wei Ying were talking so animatedly that Wei Ying had almost knocked a cup off the table.

Shen Jiu wanted to reprimand the brat and remind Meng Yao that he was supposed to watch his shidi, but was forced to express his gratitude to the hosts instead. As Jiang Fengmian thanked him for honoring their dinner with his presence, Yu Ziyuan kept looking as if she had sucked a lemon.

"Tell me, Shen Shi, what did my husband promise you? He likes to be generous, but I'm the one who decided what your work is worth," asked Yu Ziyuan when they started eating.

He didn't like talking to people during mealtimes. He especially didn't like talking to rude, confrontational people during mealtimes. Still, he answered, because he couldn't afford to be rude to the wretched woman: "While this Shen Shi would surely be grateful to receive money for her services, the reason why I agreed to come here is education. My son and my ward require a teacher to learn the way of the sword and this Shen Shi could only help them establish their Foundations."

"Your son… and who's his father?"

"Yue Qingyuan, he was a cultivator. He helped me learn what I know, but sadly he died too early."

"To lose your husband while you're still so young, what a pity." There was no pity in Yu Ziyuan's voice as she said this. "Are you looking to get married again?"

"Never. My red string of fate[2] is already torn and my heart is broken. I can never care for another, so I'd rather spend my life on teaching."

Never before had a lie tasted so true in his mouth.

"I sure hope you do better than our previous teacher. She had a loose tongue."

"San-niang, I don't think…" interjected Jiang Fengmian.

"Don't you think our new teacher needs to know? The woman taught our daughter that she should avoid behaving like her mother if she wants a good marriage! What do you think of this advice Shen Shi?"

"I think that commenting on the relationship between one's employers is highly inappropriate."

Maintaining an impression of gentle attentiveness was beginning to take a toll. He had no idea how genuine he looked, because it took all his effort to stop himself from sneering.

"You're a clever one, aren't you?"

"That's why I was chosen as your children's teacher, I suppose," said Shen Jiu barely keeping himself in line.

"I suppose you wouldn't mind if I came to oversee your lessons from time to time?"

"You'd honour me with such attention," said Shen Jiu with deference that disgusted him.

When they were finally able to go to the Quiet Lotus Pavilion, Shen Jiu could finally relax his face. When left to his own devices, his face settled into a frown. It was the expression that felt the most natural for him.

"Does Madam Yu hate you, Shizun?" asked Wei Ying. It was telling that not only did he notice the dislike, but he was so concerned that he asked about it instead of running around the house. Yu Ziyuan really was not a subtle person.

"You can't ask about things like that directly, A-Ying," chided Meng Yao softly.

"But it's Shizun," said the boy as if it explained everything.

Perhaps it was an opportunity to experiment.

"Madam Yu feels threatened by my presence because I'm a new woman in her house with direct access to her children. She also feels offended that her husband didn't consult her about hiring me. I'm sure it will pass once she sees I'm not a threat. But for now, it's better for you to avoid her if possible."

The children stared at him. Was it so surprising to hear? Though Shen Jiu could admit that he wasn't usually that thorough in explaining and he was likely not as direct.

"Would you like some tea, Mother?" asked Meng Yao cautiously.

Shen Jiu nodded in agreement. While Meng Yao busied himself looking for supplies and making tea and Wei Ying busied himself getting in Meng Yao's way, Shen Jiu addressed the System: "How many Lore points do I have now?"

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He clenched his teeth. That was a pathetic amount! Gaining 5000 would take forever at this rate.

He drank his tea and watched the children explore the house quietly. It was a good blend for nighttime, gentle and soothing, and it would not get in the way of sleep. He felt his muscles relax and some of the day's irritation left him. Before going to sleep, Shen Jiu went on a short walk alone. When he returned, he fell asleep immediately, even though he could hear the children talking in their own room.

When Shen Jiu woke up, there was fog outside. He was in such good spirits that he didn't even chide the boys for staying up too late last night. Shen Jiu ordered the still half-asleep children to do their physical drills and rushed to the library, which was luckily open. Finally, he could take his time exploring it.

It had been agreed that he would have a day to prepare for the lessons. It would be prudent of him to make a plan, but instead he settled with a cultivation manual.

He studied the text cross-referencing it with his own knowledge. The stages, the pathways, the dantian… it was all the same. He breathed out in relief. The discovery made some old

worry uncoil in his chest. To this day he wasn't entirely certain that he wasn't giving the children and himself a faulty Foundation.

While the core principles were the same, the Jiangs had their own approach to everything, which was usual among cultivation sects. Their fighting forms were more fluid than Qing Jing Peak's. If Shen Jiu could compare his fighting style to a force of nature, it would be the cold mountain wind: precise, cutting but graceful in its own way. Meanwhile the Jiang style had more in common with water, in particular with the quick-running water of a river. It was quick, fluid and adaptable, perfectly in tune with Wei Wuxian's character.

The Jiangs also paid less attention to meditation and moderation, focusing on physical conditioning. He noted an interesting form of meditation which required floating on a piece of ice in a river stream. The Jiang ancestors were an inventive bunch.

"For some reason I expected to find you here," said Jiang Fengmian, startling Shen Jiu out of his thoughts.

"Sect Leader Jiang!"

He jumped out of his seat, bowing politely, but the Sect Leader lifted him out of his bow.

"You can call me Jiang Fengmian," offered the Sect Leader.

"Sect Leader Jiang, I'm not sure that such familiarity would be appropriate," said Shen Jiu. He had no idea what the man was thinking. Of course he could show respect to his children's teacher, but not like that and not with his wife on the warpath!

"If you think so, I won't insist. Madam Shen, I have something for you."

He took a purple bundle of silk out of his Qiankun pouch[3] and handed it to Shen Jiu.

"These are the disciple robes for Wei Ying and Yue Yao as well as a robe in Jiang colors for you. Yesterday I didn't have enough time to prepare an appropriate gift for our new teachers, so allow me to correct this mistake today," said Jiang Fengmian earnestly. His eyes had a familiar dog-like shine to them. Just like Yue Qingyuan when he intruded on him with some useless trinket he called a gift. Was Jiang Fengmian also trying to buy his forgiveness? Was it his way to apologize for his wife's harshness?

Shen Jiu bit his lip and lowered his eyes to look at the robes in his hand. He separated the one meant for him: it was a paler shade of purple and embroidered with lotuses on the hem. He could not refuse a gift from a sect leader. And it was appropriate to give something to a new teacher.

"This Shen Shi is grateful for Sect Leader Jiang's generosity," he said, but he didn't bow. He didn't want the man to lift him again.

He expected the Sect Leader to leave him alone after that, but the damned man didn't leave. The librarian was watching their exchange with fascination. Shen Jiu could've sworn that the

old woman was only pretending to tidy the shelf, so she could remain closer to them, and eavesdrop more conveniently.

"I see you've taken interest in our cultivation techniques?" asked Jiang Fengmian, looking down on the cultivation manual.

"This Shen Shi's cultivation has been lacking proper guidance for some time, so I take any opportunity to improve it."

"If you have any questions, feel free to ask me," said Jiang Fengmian.

Then, the man still did not leave! He stayed asking inane questions about the quality of Shen Jiu's sleep and his meal preferences. Each question was a test of Shen Jiu's composure. Familiar questions asked in the same manner with the familiar face… he dreamed of removing Jiang Fengmian's tongue from his mouth just to make him stop.

After three more questions which he answered in such a curt manner that it was almost rude, Shen Jiu couldn't take any more. He put the manual on the bundle of robes and looked down: "Sect Leader Jiang, your concern is appreciated, but I must beg my leave now. I should attend to the children. This place is still new for them, so I am worried."

The next time he saw the Sect Leader was late in the afternoon. It was time for Meng Yao and Wei Ying to officially become guest disciples and Shen Jiu had spent hours fussing over their appearance, making sure that their new purple robes were pristine.

The ceremony itself was not as formal as could be expected. Small tables and cushions were brought to the courtyard, next to an old oak tree which protected them from the rays of the setting sun. The disciples were an unruly bunch, lacking propriety and making too much noise for the occasion. Shen Jiu dreaded the influence those children would inevitably have on Wei Ying.

"Today you'll become a part of Yunmeng Jiang clan. Our motto is: "Attempt the impossible." That means that we never give up on a challenge."

Unless the challenge is your own wife, thought Shen Jiu with some amusement. The Sect Leader had clearly given up on this particular challenge long ago.

After speaking some more about the clan's nature, Jiang Fengmian poured the children tea. Shen Jiu scoffed at the gesture.

"Yue Yao, do you promise to always attempt the impossible, to do the right thing even if the whole world is against you?"

"Yes," said the boy. His cute little face looked so sincere! Shen Jiu wanted to laugh. He didn't trust the boy to fulfill the promise.

As Wei Ying promised the same thing, Shen Jiu's thoughts became less amused. This motto, this world view… that was the downfall of Wei Wuxian. For some reason Shen Jiu loathed the thought of this bright-eyed child becoming Yiling Patriarch.

[1] One of the most severe and profound insults in Chinese culture. For the persona of "the humble widow Shen Shi" to scream this would instantly destroy the image of a refined teacher. return to text ↩

[2] A popular East Asian folk belief, particularly within Japanese and Chinese mythology. This red string is tied around the pinky fingers of those fated for one another. It can be tangled but it can’t be torn. Here Shen Jiu diverts the legend a bit to make a stronger metaphor. return to text ↩

[3] A small bag infused with spatial magic, allowing it to hold far more than its external size would suggest. return to text ↩

Chapter 11: Children will listen.

"Your calligraphy is a reflection of your personality," said Mother, studying the poems they had copied with narrowed eyes. "Cultivating good penmanship is the direct road to cultivating good character."

It was far from the first time that she had taught Meng Yao something, but he couldn't help marveling at how natural she looked in the classroom.

"Jiang Yanli," Mother addressed her sharply. "Your hand is like a steady river, moving smoothly along the paper. You conceal your strokes' endings[1], a sign of restraint. I would say you show too much restraint. Allow your script to show its spirit more. Your verticals never waver, showing that you do have a backbone hidden somewhere. I would like to see more of it."

After saying that, Mother turned her eyes to Meng Yao. He tensed, ready for her judgment.

"Yue Yao." He wasn't used to hearing this name from her. There was a flicker of wistfulness in her eyes as she said it. "I have guided your hand for years. The consistency of your characters is unnatural in its perfection - a testament to your diligence. You, too, conceal the endings overly much, stifling your spirit. Your finishing strokes are the only demonstration of your true strength… always sharp, like a blade."

Mother didn't finish, shifting her gaze to Jiang Cheng and leaving Meng Yao to ponder the meaning of her last observation.

"Jiang Cheng," Mother said, moving the papers on her table and studying the writing once more. "The composition is perfectly balanced. You understand the meaning of duty well. But you choke your brush[2]. A hand with a whip that falters before making a strike." She paused to look Young Master Jiang in the eye.

"The passion you are trying to stifle? It's not a flaw. If you use it correctly, it can be your strength."

Young Master Jiang lowered his eyes, his cheeks pink, but nodded resolutely.

"Wei Ying," Mother sighed, as she often did when faced with Wei Ying's calligraphy. Meng Yao did his best to teach his brother, but it was a losing game.

"Your strokes flee from one another like startled donkeys. Your brush runs quicker than your mind. And look how this character overpowers all its neighbors! Your writing lacks balance. You and Jiang Cheng are the same age, but his calligraphy shows a diligent young man. Yours clearly belongs to a child, daydreaming of chasing frogs instead of controlling his brush!"

"Sorry, Shizun," said Wei Ying, making a sad face. "I'll practice more."

He definitely would not practice more unless Meng Yao or his mother forced him to. Wei Ying always had a million more interesting things occupying his mind than studying.

When the lesson was over, Meng Yao, Wei Ying, and Jiang Cheng rushed to the courtyard where the head disciple, Jiang Jingheng, was waiting for them with a group of disciples. Meng Yao already remembered most of their faces. By the end of the week he'd make sure to learn all of their names.

"All of you are here now?" asked Jiang Jingheng absentmindedly. "Run ten laps around the courtyard."

The stocky disciple with an unexpectedly high voice groaned. "You promised that we'd get to learn how to fight with swords soon! We ran in the morning already!"

"Shut up, Jiang Quan! Don't think that because you're my first cousin I'm not going to send you to kneel at the ancestral hall!"

They began to run. Meng Yao didn't mind the exercise, but he noticed a certain lack of imagination in their training. Jiang Jingheng did not treat them like his students. He treated them like children he was asked to babysit.

When Meng Yao had three laps left, he noticed that his fellow disciples were gathering. As he joined them, he was surprised to see the Sect Leader himself.

He didn't expect the man to take part in the training of young disciples. It didn't seem like something someone that important should waste his time on. Then again, the Sect Leader's heir was here as well. Perhaps he wanted to make sure Jiang Cheng received the education he was due.

"Wei Ying, Yue Yao, how are you settling in?" asked the Sect Leader, startling Meng Yao. He didn't expect to be addressed so soon.

"Shizun said my handwriting looks like a herd of donkeys today!" said Wei Ying proudly. That was not something to be proud of in Meng Yao's opinion.

"We're settling in well. Thank you for your hospitality, Sect Leader," said Meng Yao quickly, to stop Wei Ying from sharing some other embarrassing fact.

"Uncle Jiang, Jingheng-ge doesn't want to teach us how to use a sword!" tattled Jiang Quan.

"Don't pay him any mind, Sect Leader. I'll teach them only when they prove that they have enough discipline for it."

The Sect Leader laughed. "There's no harm in showing them some basic forms. Go take a break, Jiang Jingheng. I'll teach them in your stead."

Jiang Jingheng did not argue. He bowed shallowly and rushed away, likely happy to be rid of them. The Sect Leader ordered a servant to bring them training swords. Then he demonstrated the correct grip, waiting patiently for everybody to get it.

"If you want the sword to obey you, treat it like a part of your own body. It should be an extension of your will," said the Sect Leader.

"A-Cheng, come forward to demonstrate," called the Sect Leader. "Your mother mentioned that she taught you some basic forms."

Jiang Cheng stepped out of the line, clearly nervous. Meng Yao quickly noted his bad posture. If it were Wei Ying, he'd make a note to correct him later.

"Now demonstrate 'Flower Petal in the Quick River'," said the Sect Leader.

Jiang Cheng did several quick steps before making a lunge with his sword. Meng Yao committed the movements to his memory. It wasn't like anything his mother had taught him.

"Now all of you repeat the move until I tell you to stop. I'll correct as necessary."

Meng Yao adjusted his grip on the sword so it wasn't too firm or too loose, just as Sect Leader Jiang had taught them. Then he repeated the move. He remembered the sequence perfectly, but he could tell that his flow was off. It took him significantly more time to perform than it did Jiang Cheng. Meng Yao kept trying until he was pleased with himself, not noticing anything else around him.

"Excellent, Yue Yao!" said the Sect Leader, putting his big warm palm on Meng Yao's shoulder. "If I didn't know better, I would have thought you had learned this move before."

Meng Yao froze. Such direct praise was unfamiliar to him. From his mother, "Passable" or "Acceptable", together with a slight curl of her mouth, was the highest praise one could hope for. It was hard to contain his smile after being praised by the Sect Leader himself.

The Sect Leader moved on to correct Wei Ying, who, as expected, had already forgotten what he had observed. His memory was awful, but once he finally got something, he would do it perfectly. Meng Yao often found himself outperformed by his little brother once he caught up. It just made him try thrice as hard.

He watched the Sect Leader laugh and ruffle Wei Ying's hair, still in a daze. It seemed that both of them were in the Sect Leader's favor. Meng Yao looked at the disciples around him, gauging their reaction. When his gaze fell on Jiang Cheng, Meng Yao felt a pang of fear. The boy's face was thunderous, his grip on the sword too tight.

Jealousy was a dangerous emotion, especially coming from someone in a high position. It would also get in the way of Meng Yao's plans. Since the first day, he'd figured that he could become friends with Jiang Yanli, while Wei Ying quite naturally got close to her brother. It was the best way to secure their position here, but the plan would fail miserably if Jiang Cheng actively disliked them.

The training was followed by the communal lunch, a loud and chaotic affair. Jiang Cheng pointedly took a seat far from them, confusing ever-so-oblivious Wei Ying. No matter how hard he tried to explain, his brother was useless when it came to reading the room. And this

time, he didn’t even have time to explain. The moment they sat down, they were bombarded with questions from eager disciples.

"Do you come from a minor sect?" asked Gao Xiaoli, the freckled boy who had introduced himself the day before.

"No. My mother was our teacher, so any aptitude we show is her achievement," said Meng Yao, lowering his eyes.

"Your mother is the new teacher for Young Mistress and Young Master, right? She’s so elegant and refined. It’s like she came from a painting!" gushed Jiang Liao. She had been one of the first people who approached them after they had been accepted as guest disciples.

"You’re lucky to get such a beautiful teacher, Jiang Cheng," said the older disciple, whose name Meng Yao had yet to find out. He gave him a long look to remember his face, just to be careful.

"I don’t need a teacher like her!" huffed Jiang Cheng.

Jiang Cheng had looked pleased enough during their calligraphy lesson. If he disliked Meng Shi it was a new development.

"What’s that supposed to mean?" asked Wei Ying, uncharacteristically serious.

"I’m sure Young Master Jiang misspoke," said Meng Yao quickly. If Wei Ying got into a fight with the sect’s heir, that would be a catastrophe.

Jiang Cheng stood up quickly, shaking the table and making his neighbors yelp in surprise: "You should just go home! Everything was better before you came here!" He stomped away, his bowl still full.

"Young Mistress Jiang is in a bad mood today," snickered Jiang Liao. Meng Yao gasped at her audacity.

"Yeah, don’t pay him any mind. He’s just like that sometimes," said Gao Xiaoli.

Meng Yao ate his food while contemplating all the ways to solve this situation. When their free time came, he rushed to the kitchens.

"My younger brother has a stomach ache from overeating. Could I possibly make a remedy for him here?" he asked one of the cooks, making sure to smile sweetly. The women cooed at him.

After he got permission, Meng Yao took his time toasting the rice. He was quiet and unobtrusive, and soon the staff forgot about him and started to exchange gossip. He overheard "…new teacher’s son…" and "…the Mistress is furious…". Then there was the single word "bastards", and Meng Yao froze.

Could they be thinking that he and Wei Ying were Jiang Fengmian’s bastards? He’d say this was a ridiculous theory, but it made a lot of things make sense. Jiang Fengmian’s overblown

kindness and generosity, his lingering looks at Meng Yao's mother, full of strange longing… And when Mother looked at the Sect Leader, there was always hurt in her eyes. Was there some old history Meng Yao simply wasn't aware of? Mother had refused to reveal the name of his real father after all.

Meng Yao's thoughts were interrupted by the unexpected arrival of Jiang Yanli. The kitchens were not the place where he'd expect to see the daughter of a sect leader. Could it be that she came here in search of fresh rumors, just like Meng Yao? Perhaps she was more cunning than she seemed.

"Young Mistress Jiang," he said, bowing to her politely. She bowed back just as deeply.

"Please, now that you're officially a disciple, you can call me Shijie[3]," said the girl. "Do you need help with anything, Yue-shidi? If you're cooking something, I could help. It is a passion of mine!"

Meng Yao wondered whether it was strange for a girl of her status and age to try to connect to him so desperately. He wondered, with a pang of sympathy, whether Jiang Yanli was lonely.

"I'm almost done, so there's no need. It's a remedy for A-Ying's stomach, simple toasted rice tea[4]."

"Oh, I haven't heard about a remedy like that. How is it prepared?"

Meng Yao described the recipe to Jiang Yanli, who seemed genuinely interested. He relished the opportunity to talk to her for multiple reasons: one, she was the daughter of the sect leader, so it was sensible to get on her good side, two, she could have some insight into Jiang Cheng's strange behavior, and three, Meng Yao genuinely liked her as a person.

"I hope this remedy will help Wei-shidi[5]," said Jiang Yanli.

"Thank you! It usually does."

Meng Yao took a moment to summon some courage to ask, "Excuse me, Shijie, if I'm being imprudent, but are you perhaps here to make something for Young Master Jiang?"

"Yes! How did you know?"

"He stormed off without finishing his lunch, so he must be quite hungry by now."

"A-Cheng is in a bad mood today, so I wanted to make lotus root rib soup for him. It's his favorite, you see."

"Young Master Jiang is very fortunate to have such a devoted elder sister."

Jiang Yanli smiled at him. "And Wei-shidi is very fortunate to have such an attentive elder brother."

"Perhaps after I deliver the remedy, I could assist you with cooking. I have a lot of experience cutting vegetables."

If she asked, he'd lie that he helped his mother cook. He didn't need the shadow of his shameful past clinging to him.

"Your help and company are always welcome!" said Jiang Yanli, clearly pleased with his offer.

It didn't take long to find Wei Ying. The boy was sulking by the frog pond.

"Yao-ge, why is Jiang Cheng angry with me? I asked him whether he wanted to play with frogs, and he just ignored me. I thought I got turned invisible for a moment, but Gao-shixiong could see me."

"I'm trying to fix it. Wait a bit. And drink this." He handed Wei Ying the cup.

"What's this?"

"A special potion that will make you turn into a frog."

"Really?!"

"No, but it tastes good."

Wei Ying shrugged and drank the tea in one gulp.

"I think it would be better with the red sauce we had at lunch!"

"Is that so? I'll make sure to add it next time," lied Meng Yao, and left his brother to poke at tadpoles.

Jiang Yanli smiled when he returned. They spent around an hour cooking together and exchanging stories about their brothers. When the soup was ready, Meng Yao offered to walk Jiang Yanli to her brother's room. Once they were outside and relatively alone, he told her in a very concerned tone about Jiang Cheng refusing to spend time with Wei Ying.

Jiang Yanli frowned. "I was afraid that could happen. My mother said some unpleasant things yesterday. She repeated those awful rumors, and I think Jiang Cheng took them for the truth."

"It's truly unfortunate. I'm afraid I can guess what kind of rumors they were..."

"I'll speak to Jiang Cheng about it. He's a sensitive child, but he cools off quickly."

"Perhaps the four of us could go for a short walk after dinner? I think if they have to spend time together, they will quickly forget to be mad at each other."

Not that Wei Ying was truly mad. That boy could forgive almost everything.

"That would be lovely! Let's meet near the little lotus pond next to the oak tree."

Meng Yao assured her that they would be there. When he returned to the Quiet Lotus Pavilion, his mother was reading, surrounded by papers.

"Where have you been? Wasting time with that brat Wei Ying again?" she asked coldly, not lifting her eyes from the book.

"No, Mother. I was in the kitchen, cooking with Jiang Yanli."

"Why would you waste your time on that? Now, I need you to bring me some paper from the classroom."

"Of course, Mother. But before I do that, I wanted to discuss some concerning things with you…" started Meng Yao nervously. He didn't want to anger his mother by saying the wrong thing.

"What is it? Be quick about it."

"There is a rumor that you and Jiang Fengmian had a dalliance in the past, and that Wei Ying and I are his bastard children."

He studied her face, waiting for a clue, but his mother looked more confused than anything else.

"This is ridiculous! Why are you even listening to this garbage?"

Was she saying that Jiang Fengmian wasn't his father? Meng Yao was too intimidated to ask directly. She'd surely bite his head off no matter whether it was true or not!

"It will influence the way we're treated here. I was thinking that perhaps you should keep your distance from the Sect Leader."

"I wasn't going to spend time with him anyway! I don't need his pity!" huffed his mother.

"Pity?"

"He always looks at me as if I'm some barefoot orphan begging for spare change. It's infuriating!"

"Are you sure about that, Mother?" asked Meng Yao. As he grew older, he was beginning to think that perhaps his mother wasn't the best at reading people.

"Of course, I'm sure! Now go and bring me my paper. I've waited long enough!"

When Meng Yao brought Wei Ying to the oak tree, the Jiang siblings were already waiting for them. Jiang Cheng had his arms crossed and his lips pursed.

"You're late!" he said as soon as he saw them.

"A-Cheng, they are not late," said Jiang Yanli, her tone indicating that they had already had this conversation. "We just came early."

"Because Mother is angry at Father. And it’s all their fault!"

"A-Cheng!"

"Did we do something?" asked Wei Ying, confused. Meng Yao faltered. He didn’t expect the situation to blow up like this.

"You shouldn’t have come here at all! Now everybody says that your mother is a loose woman and you’re my father by-blows. And he clearly likes you two better than me! Maybe one of you can become his new heir."

Meng Yao clenched his fists. This again, why did he always have to hear people disparage his mother this way? She did nothing to deserve it.

"What are you even saying?! I might not remember my father well, but his name was Wei Changze! I’ve never seen your father before he came to Auntie Sun’s house!"

"My mother met your father less than a month ago," added Meng Yao. "And my father’s name was Yue Qingyuan. Take a look at A-Ying and me. Do we share any features with your father?"

"Listen to them A-Cheng. Those rumors don’t make any sense."

"Then why does my father like you better than me?" asked Jiang Cheng, his eyes teary. Meng Yao suddenly felt bad for the child. It really wasn’t fair.

"I don’t know! But if he doesn’t like you, it just means he’s stupid!"

"A-Ying!" hissed Meng Yao. "You can’t say things like that!"

"You should always tell people when they are being stupid. That’s how they become better!" said Wei Ying with a grin. Meng Yao had a feeling that perhaps his mother was a bad influence.

"Please don’t insult the Sect Leader to his face," begged Meng Yao.

There was a strange sound like a sob coming from Jiang Cheng, but when Meng Yao looked at him, he was surprised to see the boy laughing.

"You’re so weird! There’s no way that we can be related," he said, shaking his head.

"I’ll take it as a compliment," said Wei Ying brightly. Jiang Yanli laughed.

After that they set off on the walk. Wei Ying was talking their ears off, but Jiang Cheng didn’t seem angry anymore.

"Your brother is a treasure," said Jiang Yanli softly when the younger boys got ahead of them. "A-Cheng is lucky to have a friend like this."

"Thank you," said Meng Yao. He wasn't so sure that Wei Ying needed a friend like Jiang Cheng, but for now the benefits outweighed the disadvantages.

"Look there's a fish!" called Wei Ying, running towards the river. "I think it's a golden carp!"

"What would a golden carp be doing here?" scoffed Jiang Cheng, but moved closer.

"I don't know. But look, it's closer now!"

"I don't see it."

"Come closer! It's right here!"

Meng Yao should have seen this coming, but he didn't, so he watched his little brother splash the son of a sect leader with dirty river water in mute horror.

"What would you do that for?!" shouted Jiang Cheng.

"Wei Ying! Come here right now!" shouted Meng Yao at the same time.

"That's for disrespecting Shizun after she has been so nice to you!" said Wei Ying victoriously. Perhaps Meng Yao was a bad influence as well.

He was quickly approaching the boys and would have been close enough to drag Wei Ying away in a few moments, but before he could, Jiang Cheng shoved Wei Ying straight into the river.

"A-Cheng! Why would you do that?" chided Jiang Yanli.

"He started it!"

Then Jiang Cheng let out a yelp because Wei Ying dragged him into the river by his robes. There was a big splash that made the bottom of Meng Yao's robes wet.

"Get out of there, you two!" called Meng Yao crossly. Wei Ying giggled and splashed water at him.

"It is too cold for swimming. You'll get ill if you don't come out soon," chided Jiang Yanli, and got splashed by her younger brother for all her trouble.

"That's it," hissed Meng Yao, and jumped into the water. He was already wet, and he had a younger brother to drown. The children laughed and swam away in different directions. There was a lot of splashing around until Meng Yao took hold of Wei Ying and dunked him under the water vindictively. It was too bad that the little brat enjoyed it.

"Jie-Jie!" squeaked Jiang Cheng. Meng Yao looked with wide eyes at the sect leader's daughter, who had abandoned all dignity and was now chasing her brother in the water. Meng Yao was so distracted by what he had seen that Wei Ying managed to twist out of his hold. By the time all four of them were out of the water, their lips were blue.

"Mother is going to kill us," concluded Meng Yao, looking at Wei Ying, who was shaking and dripping water everywhere.

"Our mother is going to kill us more," said Jiang Cheng.

"Shizun is going to kill us twice," said Wei Ying solemnly.

"Perhaps if we are quiet about it, nobody will notice?" said Jiang Yanli. She didn't seem sure about it.

"We can try," sighed Meng Yao. He didn't think there was a way to hide it from his mother.

Luck was definitely not on their side, because as they walked back along a route that, according to Jiang Yanli, was less populous, they stumbled into the Sect Leader himself. They stared at each other silently for a moment. Then Jiang Fengmian laughed.

"Did you have a nice swim?" he asked.

"Very refreshing," said Wei Ying.

"Perhaps too refreshing," said the Sect Leader, clearly amused. "Let me fix it for you."

He rummaged through a pouch in his sleeve until he retrieved four small pieces of paper, which he attached to each of their foreheads in quick succession. Meng Yao felt a sudden surge of warmth. His clothes were now dry and warm. Even his hair was dry.

"Thank you, Father," said Jiang Yanli. The rest of them echoed her.

"What's this? Will we learn how to make thingies like that?" asked Wei Ying eagerly.

"Those are moisture-gathering talismans. We usually use them to save wood from rotting, but they are good for drying clothes quickly as well."

These talismans were likely too expensive to be used for something as mundane as drying clothes.

"Now run along before your mothers come looking for you," said the Sect Leader. "A-Cheng, A-Li, I'm glad to see that you're making friends."

The surprised look on Jiang Cheng's face was a little sad to see. At least he had finally gotten his father's attention.

When it was time for them to go in separate directions, Jiang Yanli smiled at them. "Thank you for today! That's the most fun I have had in years!"

Jiang Cheng looked down. "Me too. And I'm sorry that I spoke rudely about Master Shen. She's much better than our old teacher."

He turned away and left quickly so they wouldn't be able to answer. That didn't stop Wei Ying one bit. "Let's play again tomorrow, Jiang Cheng!" he shouted, waving his hand. Even

in the twilight, Meng Yao could see how red the tips of Jiang Cheng’s ears were.

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[1] In the context of Chinese calligraphy, "concealed endings" refer to a brush technique where the tip of the brush is hidden or withdrawn at the beginning or end of a stroke, rather than being exposed.return to text ↩

[2] “Choking the brush" refers to a fundamental error in calligraphy where the person grips the brush too tightly and presses it too firmly against the paper. Usually it’s a sign that the writer is too afraid of making a mistake and therefore overly controlling. This way of writing produces stiff and lifeless strokes. return to text ↩

[3] Literally "Elder Martial Sister." This is a term of address used by a junior disciple toward a senior female disciple within the same sect. return to text ↩

[4] A simple, traditional digestive remedy made by toasting raw rice until brown and then steeping it in hot water. It is known for its soothing, warming properties. return to text ↩

[5] Literally "Younger Martial Brother." This is a term of address used by a senior disciple toward a junior male disciple within the same sect. return to text ↩

Chapter 12: Hidden blades and hidden wounds.

An extra table appeared in his classroom overnight. Shen Jiu knew what it meant the moment he saw it, so when Yu Ziyuan walked into the classroom in the middle of the lesson he was not surprised.

Despite her insistence on overseeing the lessons, Shen Jiu hadn't yet had to suffer through Yu Ziyuan's attention. He suspected that Jiang Fengmian had been conveniently finding an emergency for his wife to deal with around the time of their lessons.

"Madam Yu, thank you for honoring this humble teacher's lesson with your illustrious presence," said Shen Jiu forcing a polite smile onto his face. He didn't know how long he could keep up the illusion of propriety.

"I need to see with my own eyes what your teachings are worth," said the woman as she strode to her table. "After all you came to us with no recommendations."

Jiang Cheng squirmed in his seat, likely uncomfortable with the idea of his mother witnessing his unavoidable mistakes. Jiang Yanli was the picture of propriety, but Shen Jiu could see the tension in her posture.

"I've just about finished explaining the rules of weiqi and the philosophy behind it. Now I'll give a demonstration of a famous game for you."

"Weiqi? Are you teaching them or entertaining them?" asked Yu Ziyuan, her voice filled with disdain.

"This game is a great way to teach strategy, foresight, and patience - the qualities any cultivator needs."

"I suppose for A-Cheng it might be useful, but what about A-Li? She's going to marry the Jin Sect Heir! She doesn't need to waste her time on games if there are pursuits more deserving of her attention."

"Excuse me, Madam Yu, if my understanding is lacking, but running the household requires both strategy and foresight, does it not?"

"A pretty argument," said Yu Ziyuan. "If it is as vital as you say, then prove to me that you know the subject."

"Should I proceed with my demonstration then?"

"No. Play with me!" ordered Yu Ziyuan.

There was no conceivable way to avoid this, so he prepared the board for the game. There was no good outcome for him: winning would shame and enrage Yu Ziyuan, while losing could make her doubt his competence. As he and Yu Ziyuan sat down in front of each other,

ready to spill metaphorical blood, the students gathered around them. It would be a good lesson at least.

From her moves Shen Jiu could tell that Yu Ziyuan certainly knew the rules well and likely played quite often, though he suspected that she didn't enjoy the game. There was some impatience to her moves that betrayed her desire to get it over with as quickly as possible. Shen Jiu also didn't like to beat around the bush, preferring his victories to be quick and decisive, but he could play the long game if it was required to win.

It didn't take long for Yu Ziyuan to fall into his trap, though she did fight fiercely until the very end, even past the moment when it was clear that she would lose. As she stared at the board with her face flushed, Shen Jiu felt something close to pity. He would hate being in her place. That pity didn't stop his next words.

"This game is a great demonstration that aggression without a plan can easily lead to defeat," he said.

Yu Ziyuan stood up so quickly that her clothes rustled.

"You…" she hissed, her face twisted.

"Madam Yu, I must thank you for your assistance with this demonstration. It's much better with two players to observe."

Yu Ziyuan glared at him and turned around sharply, leaving the room without saying anything.

"I'm sure that Madam Yu has some urgent sect business to attend to. Now that you've seen the demonstration I want you to play against each other. Jiang Yanli, you'll play against Yue Yao. Jiang Cheng, you'll play against Wei Ying.

He walked around the classroom observing the children as they made their first clumsy strategies. To his surprise Jiang Yanli was perfectly matched with Meng Yao, each of their games a battle of attrition. Meanwhile, Jiang Cheng beat Wei Ying with no difficulty for most of the lesson, until the brat finally figured out the game and managed to snatch the last two victories for himself.

After the lesson was concluded, Shen Jiu began putting away the boards. His fingers lingered on the one he used to defeat Yu Ziyuan. He won but gained nothing but a minuscule satisfaction. If the mistress of the house wanted him gone, she would do anything in her power to drive him away. He tried to imagine the situation from her point of view, but couldn't imagine any satisfactory conclusion that didn't end with him leaving. Not when there were rumors threatening Yu Ziyuan's position in the household and questioning her son's future.

Despite being the central figure of rumors in both of his lifetimes, Shen Jiu had little experience stopping them. His usual strategy was to let them talk until they found something else to focus their attention on, which hardly ever worked. If he wanted to do something about the rumors, he would have to ask for help. And he didn't have a lot of options.

He went to the library and spent a long time writing and rewriting a letter to Sun Peizhi. He needed her to understand the situation enough to give him advice, but subtle enough so that if somebody stole the letter they wouldn't understand the contents for what they were. He chose to mask it as a discussion of a book.

He had just finished describing "Xiao Ping's" struggle in the new household when the children came back.

"Wei Ying, scram. I need to speak with A-Yao about something."

"Can I take some rice from the kitchen to feed the fish?" asked Wei Ying, not shaken at all by the sharp tone.

"Yes, but be quick about it."

"Those rumors you told me about… In your opinion, what could I do to mitigate them?" He felt ridiculous asking a child about something like that. But Meng Yao was precocious when it came to understanding social politics.

"Let me think," said Meng Yao. "I think most rumors exist because of the Sect Leader's behavior. He ignores Jiang Cheng a lot… I don't understand why. And because of that people say that he brought us so he could choose another heir. When he's so nice to us and so distant with his son and wife, that's a reasonable conclusion for people to make."

"Do you think talking with Jiang Fengmian about it could help?" asked Shen Jiu, testing the idea in his head. He had no idea what problem the man had with his own son and he didn't want to dig into the issue, but it seemed that he had no other choice.

"You can tell him to show us less attention. He could listen to you if you explain," said Meng Yao. Shen Jiu frowned. He didn't like the attention from the Sect Leader, but there could be benefits to blatant favoritism. He wasn't sure he wanted to give it away.

"I'll think about it. Now go check on Wei Ying before he drowns the carp pond in rice."

The rest of the day was quiet and pleasant. Shen Jiu finished another cultivation manual. After dinner, the soft duet of qins filled the Quiet Lotus Pavilion with music. Wei Ying for once was sitting quietly as he listened to the soothing melody.

"I want to learn how to play too," the brat resolved after they were done.

"The qin is too refined for the likes of you. You'd do much better with something like a flute. You have the lungs for it," said Shen Jiu flatly.

Meng Yao laughed, and Wei Ying pouted. He would actually have to provide the brat with a flute some time in the future. Perhaps music would teach him at least some diligence.

After the children went to bed, Shen Jiu put on a set of dark practical robes and tied his hair into a ponytail with a black ribbon. He hadn't practiced since they came to the Lotus Pier.

He took a plain sword out of the storage room and started to go through the old Qing Jing sword forms until his back got wet with sweat.

"I have never seen this sword form before," said Jiang Fengmian, startling Shen Jiu enough to put the tip of the sword to the Sect Leader's neck.

"Don't startle a person with a weapon at hand," huffed Shen Jiu, lowering the blade. He shouldn't have spoken to a sect leader in this tone, but he couldn't bring himself to care. It was too late for pleasantries.

Now that he could get a better look at the Sect Leader, he noticed a wet stain on the front of his robes. He wondered what the man was doing in the middle of the night to end up with him at the training yard in ruined clothes.

"Always a good thing to remember. Did you learn how to use the sword from your husband?"

"Yes. Though he always refused to fight me directly," said Shen Jiu. Yue Qingyuan probably thought that Shen Jiu wasn't enough of a challenge for him.

"Would you like a sparring partner?" asked Jiang Fengmian suddenly.

Remaining alone with the Sect Leader wasn't the best strategy even if there wasn't anyone to witness it, so Shen Jiu shook his head.

"I'm not much of a challenge right now. I haven't sparred with anyone since I became a mother," said Shen Jiu honestly.

"Your form is unusual, so I think it will be interesting either way," said Jiang Fengmian. There was something strained about his smile. Shen Jiu recognized that expression. It was the one Yue Qingyuan wore after they had a particularly explosive fight, or more precisely when Shen Jiu had shouted especially hurtful things at him. He felt something move in his chest.

"Alright. Let's spar. Just don't complain if you win too quickly," warned Shen Jiu.

Jiang Fengmian insisted on fetching a plain sword for himself instead of using his proper sword. He said that it wouldn't be fair. What an annoying man!

As they stood in front of each other, Shen Jiu was the first to attack. His slice was quickly parried, as was the next, and the one after that… With every clang of metal Shen Jiu felt more at ease, remembering the long-forgotten rhythm of a fight.

Jiang Fengmian was obviously going easy on him. At first, Shen Jiu ignored it, but the more comfortable with the sword he got, the more patronizing the fight felt. Having had enough, he used one of the dirtiest moves in his arsenal, the one he didn't use even on Liu Qingge. He pretended to trip and cried out in pain, making the Sect Leader rush to his rescue. With a quick move, Shen Jiu disarmed him.

"Don't treat me like a disciple! If you want to spar, then spar!"

"But you are…"

"If I’m weak, it’s my problem. Fight me for real or leave!"

"Alright, let’s try again," said Jiang Fengmian. He looked tired.

They started again and this time Shen Jiu had a lot more trouble keeping up. He was disarmed embarrassingly quickly. Then they tried again, and again, and again… Their sixth match was the one that lasted the longest. Shen Jiu even managed to push Jiang Fengmian back. They got so into the fight that when Shen Jiu lost his sword he continued fighting, weaponless, and Jiang Fengmian didn’t stop him. Shen Jiu tried to disarm the Sect Leader using the move he hadn’t used in decades, but instead of the sword he got an elbow to the nose and fell on his behind.

"I’m so sorry!" gasped Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu shrugged, covering his nose with his sleeve to stop the blood. At least it didn’t feel broken.

"What are you so angry about anyway?" he asked as he stood up and started to brush his clothes off. He wasn’t in the mood for politeness, and he doubted Jiang Fengmian would hold it against him.

"Excuse me?"

"Don’t pretend. People don’t spar like that unless they are angry with something… or with somebody."

"Perhaps my workload was more than usual lately and that…"

"Bullshit," said Shen Jiu. "Did you have a fight with your wife? I could smell the tea on your robes as we fought."

"That’s not… I mean perhaps it…"

"Would you speak plainly? There’s no one here but the two of us, and I do not care about propriety."

"Would you like to accompany me during the negotiations with the Yao clan?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

Where did that come from!?

"What."

"I meant in the capacity of the teacher!" added Jiang Fengmian quickly. "I have thought I could take A-Li and A-Cheng… and your two boys can be part of the entourage too! We did that with their previous teacher a few times. Though you could also act as an advisor if I gave you a proper title…"

"Why would you want me at the negotiating table in the first place?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously. He did have experience with negotiation, but Jiang Fengmian couldn’t know

that. Asking a complete stranger to advise him was plain insanity.

"Alright, I'll be frank… Sect Leader Yao has been pushing me to take his daughter as a concubine for years. Your presence might restrain him from being too forceful in his approach, and if you could speak to the girl and dissuade her..."

As if somebody asked the poor girl for her opinion. Shen Jiu knew how those things worked.

"And you can't take your wife because…?"

"Because she told me that she won't come no matter how many times I ask," said Jiang Fengmian, defeated. Something moved inside Shen Jiu's chest once again and he bit his lip. Getting involved here would be unwise, not with the rumors as they were.

"Isn't Madam Yu afraid that you'll agree to the offer?"

"Well, she said that I might just as well take a concubine if I'm so determined to shame her…"

"And your solution is to bring me? Don't you think that this will make the situation even worse? What will your wife say?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously.

"I admit that I'm also wary of leaving you alone with her for two weeks. I'm not sure what she could do if I'm not here to stop her. But you're right. It was an unreasonable request. I'll just find another way to protect you in my absence. I know what the people have been saying about us, and I'm sorry that you had to face something like this in my household..."

Coming along really would piss off Yu Ziyuan even more, so it was wiser to stay. It didn't matter that Jiang Fengmian looked like a dog begging for scraps, Shen Jiu was never the type to feed strays.

[Attention User! This side quest could bring you up to 500 Lore Points if you accept it!]

That many!? He grit his teeth. The last thing he wanted was to go against his own judgment because of something that the System had said. However, he did need the Lore Points to get the answers, and at this rate he'd get the required 5000 in twenty years or so.

"I suppose I could come with you," said Shen Jiu, looking at the pathetic man in front of him. "But if your wife gets mad about it, you will be the one dealing with her."

"Thank you," said the Sect Leader, still pathetic. How did someone that pitiful become a sect leader in the first place? Oh right, nepotism. It made Shen Jiu miss Cang Qiong. Yue Qingyuan at least could deal with the marriage offers on his own.

Meng Yao looked disappointed with him when he got the news about the upcoming field trip, but he didn't say anything. No matter the consequences it had to be worth it. Jiang Fengmian had already proven himself a great source of Lore Points. For reasons unclear, their nightly conversation had gained Shen Jiu 20 points.

As expected, Yu Ziyuan wasn't happy to hear about Jiang Fengmian's brilliant idea to substitute her with another woman even if she refused to come herself. The servants started to avoid Shen Jiu, afraid that serving him would incur their Mistress' rage. It was for the better. Shen Jiu didn't like strangers in his quarters in any case.

It was decided that they would go to the Yao Sect by horseback, taking two carriages for the children and Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian wanted to check the safety of the territories that would be on their way.

Shen Jiu immediately said that Jiang Yanli and Meng Yao would go with him, leaving Jiang Fengmian with the brats. The man tried to escape it, saying that he should go on horseback with the older disciples, but Shen Jiu insisted that Jiang Cheng and Wei Ying couldn't be left on their own.

Just like Shen Jiu expected, Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli were perfect companions. Quiet and polite, they did not disturb his reading in any way and when he was in the mood for it offered an engaging conversation about poetry. Jiang Fengmian didn't appear as lucky, because when they finally stopped at an inn for the night, he was unusually tense. Wei Ying could have this effect on people. The brat unfortunately didn't have the mute option like the System.

The next day Jiang Fengmian rode on horseback, insisting that all four children should go together, allowing Shen Jiu to have some space. He couldn't argue with that, spending the time in meditation. He was so focused on that he almost missed the moment the carriage stopped.

They were in the middle of a large town. Three servants dressed in brown gathered around Jiang Fengmian, who had dismounted and was now listening to them attentively.

"There's a small change of plans," announced Jiang Fengmian once Shen Jiu approached him. "Master Xiong's young son disappeared yesterday, and they are in need of cultivators' help."

"How do we know that this is something we can help with?" asked Shen Jiu sharply. He had to deal with multiple cases where the nobles summoned cultivators because of some mundane issue, wasting their time.

"I'm not sure. I would like to speak to Master Xiong himself before making the judgement," said Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu didn't argue, though the matter seemed trivial to him. The child could have run away or been killed by some scheming relative. Children disappeared all the time.

They left the disciples to question the servants, while Jiang Fengmian and Shen Jiu took the children to see the landlord himself. Master Xiong was an old man with a spectacularly long moustache. His having a young son had certain implications that made Shen Jiu despise him on sight. The man stood up as soon as he saw the cultivators enter the room.

"Oh, thank you, thank you for coming! Now that you're here, I have hope that my boy will return home!"

"Can you tell us what happened?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

"Yesterday, when the servant came to wake my son, he wasn't in his bed. We searched the whole estate, then the whole town, but nobody saw a sign of him."

"Could he go somewhere on his own?" asked Shen Jiu.

The man seemed startled to be addressed by a woman, but he recovered quickly.

"He is only six, and though he is mischievous, I hardly think he could go past all the guards with no one taking notice. At first, I thought he could have been kidnapped for ransom, but then the peasants started to whisper about the spirit."

"The spirit?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

"The child-stealing one. They say that the children had been disappearing for years! That's the first time I've heard of that, of course."

Shen Jiu did not believe him. It was very much like the rich to ignore something terrible happening around them while it affected only the low-born. If the peasants came for help, they were likely called superstitious fools, but once the landlord's son had disappeared, it immediately became worthy of cultivators' attention.

They asked to be led to Xiong Ping's room, so they could begin the investigation. The boy's room was fitting for his station, but otherwise unremarkable, with no signs of foul play or supernatural interference. Despite that, Shen Jiu still ordered the children to investigate while he stepped back. Jiang Fengmian stood close by.

"Perhaps I should send you and the children ahead," said Jiang Fengmian once the children were busy.

"Why would you do that?"

"If the spirit targets children…"

"We don't know anything about this spirit yet. There might not be one in the first place! There is no use being hasty."

"I suppose you are right, but…"

"Let's collect more evidence before making any conclusions."

"Shizun, I found an acorn!" announced Wei Ying.

"You can keep it," said Shen Jiu blandly.

Jiang Fengmian laughed. "You are good with him."

"I am not," huffed Shen Jiu, and walked off. He wanted to speak to the children. Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli were studying the window carefully, while Jiang Cheng looked at Wei Ying

making a mess of Xiong Hong’s bedding.

"People often hide things under their mattress. Like food!" explained Wei Ying brightly. Shen Jiu had scolded him on multiple occasions for putting easily crushed food under his mattress. He understood the urge, but there were more reasonable ways to go about it.

"Did you find anything other than an acorn?" asked Shen Jiu. The children shook their heads.

"He couldn’t have left through the window. It’s sealed and neither the paper, nor the wooden lattice have been damaged," reported Meng Yao.

"There also was no sign of struggle before Wei Ying started to move things around," said Jiang Cheng judgmentally. Shen Jiu gave the boy an approving nod.

"What do you think we should do next?" asked Jiang Fengmian, joining them.

"If the peasants’ children have been disappearing as well, we should speak to them," said Jiang Yanli.

"That’s right, A-Li. I’ve already asked the disciples to find the witnesses and bring them here. Let’s ask Master Xiong to arrange a room for the interview."

The old man was, of course, eager to provide anything they needed for the sake of the investigation. Shen Jiu had inferred that the boy was his only heir, and considering his age it wasn’t likely he could get a new one easily.

Jiang Fengmian asked the children to lead the interrogation, and they did ask all the necessary questions, but the peasants were simply not helpful. More than half of them clearly came to gawk at the cultivators, not knowing anything of use. Others claimed to be the victims, but couldn’t provide much detail. They said that their child or young sibling disappeared, but couldn’t tell when exactly and reported nothing unusual other than the disappearance itself.

"What did the interrogation tell you?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

"Jackshit," thought Shen Jiu.

"The children have been disappearing in this town for more than ten years," said Meng Yao. "The first reported case is Fu Gen’s younger sister, who disappeared twelve years ago. In total there have been twenty-six victims, including the latest one, Xiong Ping. This is also the first case when somebody of high birth has been targeted. The longest break between disappearances has been three years, the shortest two months, so there doesn’t appear to be a pattern here. There were also several cases of two or three disappearances from the same family."

"Brilliant report, Yue Yao," praised Jiang Fengmian. He appeared honestly impressed by the answer. Shen Jiu wondered how impressed he’d be if Meng Yao named all the victims, because he could certainly do that. But now was no time for parlor tricks.

"Now tell me what we should do next," ordered Shen Jiu.

"We should learn about local folk tales. I've tried to ask the witnesses about them, but they don't appear knowledgeable. I think we need to talk to the older folk," said Jiang Yanli.

Jiang Fengmian smiled at his daughter encouragingly. "Perhaps I should start taking you with me on the night hunts, A-Li. You have a good head for it."

Shen Jiu doubted that Yu Ziyuan would accept it. She seemed to have given up on her daughter as a cultivator, molding her into the future Sect Leader's wife.

When they left the estate and met with the disciples, everybody gathered around Jiang Fengmian.

"While I arrange the rooms for us in the inn, you should ask around the town about anything of note connected to the disappearances. Madam Shen, Jiang Jingheng, can you please look after the children while I am away?"

"That is my job, is it not?" said Shen Jiu. Jiang Jingheng simply nodded, his face bland. Shen Jiu would rather not have him tagging along.

Then the children went around the market chaotically, asking the people who seemed knowledgeable to them, while Shen Jiu and Jiang Jingheng followed them like shadows. What they got was mostly confused reactions and strange looks. With Jiang Yanli and Meng Yao in charge of questioning there was little to correct, so Shen Jiu didn't have much to do. He checked on Wei Ying from time to time, making sure the brat didn't get distracted by some bright market stall, but even Wei Ying behaved.

"Mother, do you have any advice for us?" asked Meng Yao, the edges of his smile desperately tense.

"Are you giving up so soon?" asked Shen Jiu. He himself felt annoyed by the lack of information, but this was a good teaching moment.

He didn't have time to finish it, because he heard a dog bark. Knowing what would follow, Shen Jiu turned to Wei Ying to stop him, but the brat was already running, provoking the damn mutt to chase him. Shen Jiu grabbed Meng Yao by the shoulder, not allowing him to follow Wei Ying. The last thing they needed was to get separated in the crowd.

"A-Ying, wait! It's going to chase you if you run!" shouted Meng Yao. It didn't help.

Shen Jiu saw a purple back in the direction where Wei Ying had run, and turned to look at the Jiang children. There was only Jiang Yanli.

"A-Cheng!" called Jiang Yanli suddenly. "He was just there! Where did he go?"

"He must have gone after A-Ying," said Meng Yao. "Young Master Jiang did promise to protect him from the dogs when he introduced A-Ying to Princess, Jasmine, and Love."

"That's the last thing we needed right now… Let's find them before Uncle Jiang comes back," said Jiang Jingheng. Shen Jiu glared at him. If Jiang Jingheng paid attention, he would have stopped Jiang Cheng from following Wei Ying and making their job more difficult.

They went through the market in the direction the two boys had run, but there was no sign of them at all. They tried to ask around, but the directions they received only made them go in circles fruitlessly.

"Once we find him, Wei Ying is dead," concluded Shen Jiu. "He won't be scared of dogs anymore when I'm done with him."

"Master Shen, could the spirit have taken them?" asked Jiang Yanli worriedly.

"That's not likely, but we should find them quickly either way. People can be much more dangerous than the spirits."

As they went along the street, they passed the inn and encountered Jiang Fengmian, who immediately noticed the missing children.

"Where are A-Cheng and A-Ying?" he asked. Shen Jiu wondered when Wei Ying became A-Ying to Jiang Fengmian.

Once he was told the story, Jiang Fengmian called back all the disciples and ordered them to search the whole town. There was no polite smile on his face when he gave the order.

"I shouldn't have allowed them to take part in the investigation," said Jiang Fengmian. "They are too young."

"Nothing has happened yet. Wei Ying is just making trouble where there is none to be found like he always does," said Shen Jiu.

They should have come back already. They knew where the inn was. A lot of bad things could happen to the children who didn't learn not to trust adults. Shen Jiu didn't want to think of possibilities. He bit the inside of his cheek.

"I won't be able to forgive myself if something happens to them," said Jiang Fengmian. His fretting was clearly upsetting Jiang Yanli, who, having forgotten propriety in her distress, took hold of her father's robe as if afraid that he would get lost as well.

They walked around the market once again in case the boys had returned then went along a couple side streets. The longer they walked around, the more tense Jiang Fengmian got. They returned to their carriages, but there wasn't anyone there either. They were about to leave when a disciple came with the dirty-faced brats.

"I found them on the rooftop," the young man announced.

"A-Cheng!" shouted Jiang Yanli, rushing to her brother. Meng Yao looked at Shen Jiu and didn't move, despite clearly wanting to fret over the brat.

"What were you thinking, Jiang Cheng?" asked Jiang Fengmian, his voice uncharacteristically harsh. "We are investigating the disappearances of children around your age, and you decide to go on your own? What if something happened to you?"

"I was just trying to…"

"It doesn’t matter what you were trying to do! You should have stayed with the group no matter what was happening."

Jiang Cheng looked to be close to tears.

"It wasn’t Jiang Cheng’s fault! He was trying to save me from that evil dog. I was the one who ran away, so don’t be angry with Jiang Cheng," said Wei Ying quickly. He had dirt on his face to say nothing of his clothes. Shen Jiu was going to make him wash them without Meng Yao’s help.

Jiang Fengmian took a deep breath. "Let’s go to the inn. It’s getting late. We will leave tomorrow. Jiang Jingheng will stay behind with a couple of older disciples and finish the investigation."

In Shen Jiu’s opinion Jiang Jingheng was useless and would solve nothing. Despite that, he didn’t argue, eager to leave. Looking for Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng was simply too nerve-wracking. Shen Jiu walked towards Wei Ying and started rubbing his face clean with a handkerchief. "Were you running away or rolling around in the dirt like a pig?"

"That nasty dog chased me onto the roof," said Wei Ying pitifully. "Jiang Cheng made it leave, but I couldn’t get down, so he had to climb up so he could show me the way. But when he saw how high it was he couldn’t go down either!"

"When we return to Lotus Pier, you are going to do your best to make friends with Jiang Cheng’s dogs, you hear me?"

The supper was a subdued affair. Jiang Fengmian still seemed unusually tense and Jiang Cheng had hardly said anything the whole evening, even as Wei Ying tried to engage with him. As they settled for the night, Shen Jiu was asked to share the room with Jiang Yanli, while Jiang Fengmian stayed with the three boys.

In the morning, Shen Jiu was woken by a frantic knock on his door. When he finally opened it, he saw a frazzled Jiang Fengmian.

"Is A-Li in her bed?" he asked urgently.

"Of course she is. What’s the matter with you?"

Chapter 13: The Unwanted.

"How could he be missing? He was with you the whole night! Are you telling me you somehow slept through the abduction of your son?" asked Shen Jiu. "And where are A-Yao and Wei Ying?

If Jiang Fengmian left them on their own, Shen Jiu was going to kill him.

"They are… Jiang Jingheng is with them."

It was marginally better than leaving them on their own.

"Father? What are you doing here?" asked Jiang Yanli from behind him. Shen Jiu left Jiang Fengmian to explain and marched to the boys' room, despite the fact that his hair was messily braided for the night, and he only had two robes on, one of which was the night robe. If somebody thought ill of him for that, let them choke on their own poison.

As Shen Jiu entered the room, Meng Yao immediately threw himself at him like a small child who had woken up from a nightmare. Wei Ying paused for a moment before copying the gesture and hugging Shen Jiu from the other side. He froze. They were definitely too old to behave this way, but it was soothing to have them close by. He allowed the ridiculousness to continue for a few more moments, before pushing the boys away by their foreheads.

"Keep yourselves together! You are future cultivators, control yourselves."

"Madam Yue, you…" started Jiang Jingheng. His face was red and he didn't dare raise his eyes. It was irritating.

"You can guard the door from the outside," decided Shen Jiu, and glared at the head disciple until he left.

"Did you two hear or see anything of note?"

"I think I was the last person to talk to Jiang Cheng," whispered Meng Yao.

"Explain."

"I couldn't fall asleep and I noticed that Jiang Cheng wasn't sleeping either. I felt bad for the way his father scolded him, so I came to his bed and thanked him for being a good friend to A-Ying. He said that he was just keeping his promise, but he seemed to relax a bit, so I returned to my own bed. I hadn't heard anything from his side of the room before I fell asleep."

"Did you tell Jiang Fengmian about it?"

Meng Yao shook his head. "I wasn't sure I should. And he left quickly."

He was likely afraid that he would be blamed somehow. The rich and powerful liked to assign blame. Shen Jiu didn't think that Jiang Fengmian was like that but…

"Don't tell him. It's not that important."

After that Shen Jiu told Jiang Jingheng to return to the boys' room and ordered him to keep his eyes on the children no matter what happened.

When he returned to the room he was sharing with Jiang Yanli, he found the father and daughter hugging and the girl's tiny back shaking with sobs. Jiang Fengmian had a pained look on his face, which made Shen Jiu scoff.

"Are we going to look for Jiang Cheng or are you going to cry the whole morning?"
This was definitely not something he should have said to his student. He couldn't care less. Jiang Cheng wasn't bad for a spoiled little lordling, so Shen Jiu would prefer to keep him alive if possible. And that required haste.

Jiang Yanli let go of her father. "What can we even do? We couldn't find anything of note yesterday…" The girl's face was wet and her eyes were red, but at least now she attempted to think instead of succumbing to despair.

"You are not going to do anything," said Jiang Fengmian. "I'll send you two and the boys to Lotus Pier and find Jiang Cheng myself."

"And what am I supposed to tell Madam Yu? What do you imagine will happen when she finds out? I'm staying here. You need all the help you can get anyway."

"I also want to stay! I can't go away while Jiang Cheng is missing!" said Jiang Yanli. Shen Jiu had never heard her raise her voice before.

"Alright, but, A-Li, promise me that you will stay with an adult cultivator at all times."

"I promise," she said.

"Now go away so we can dress properly. I know a place where we can find new information," said Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian gave him a questioning look but did as he was told.

After they were all dressed, Shen Jiu took Jiang Fengmian, the children and the still blushing Jiang Jingheng to a place where they could find some useful information. Their faces when they realised what the place was were highly amusing.

"Is this the place you spoke of?" asked Jiang Fengmian, looking at the brothel with his eyes wide.

"I noticed it when we were searching the town yesterday. It's the best place to gather information."

"I thought it is a place where men go to have…" Wei Ying didn't finish the sentence because Meng Yao covered his mouth with his hand.

"We can’t bring the children to a brothel!" said Jiang Jingheng. Shen Jiu raised his eyebrows. That was the first time in his memory that the man had shown any care for the upbringing of the disciples of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect.

"How else should they learn to gather information?" asked Shen Jiu, and knocked on the door. A guard opened it, looking momentarily surprised to see a woman.

"We’re closed till noon," he said.

"Please tell the Madam to arrange a meeting with the oldest workers of your establishment. We’re going to pay generously for their time."

The guard left, and Shen Jiu turned to the children, "The older prostitutes know more and earn less, so paying them extra is a sure way to gain their cooperation."

"Why do they earn less?" asked Wei Ying, clearly confused. Jiang Jingheng began to cough.

"I’ll explain it to you later, A-Ying," said Meng Yao calmly.

The door opened and Shen Jiu wasn’t surprised to see the Madam herself. The guard likely informed her that there were cultivators at the door and she heard the inviting jingle of money.

The woman bowed, making the bells in her hair ring. She was young for her position, not older than forty, but she was clearly astute.

"This Fang Li is honored to welcome such esteemed guests. Please, follow me."

"Could you arrange breakfast for us and the ladies? I don’t want to interrupt their time of rest, but we are in a hurry," said Shen Jiu.

"Of course, anything you need," said Fang Li.

They were taken to a grand room with a long table, likely used for banquets. There were already three prostitutes there who seemed to be around Fang Li’s age. They were definitely too old for their profession and the fact that they remained spoke to the kindness of the brothel keeper. Something inside Shen Jiu’s chest unclenched. This was no Hundred Flowers Tower.

The prostitutes introduced themselves. The tall one was called Song Mei, the one with a birth mark under her eyes was Yuan Miu, and the one with a fan was Dong Ai.

"What could noble cultivators want from the likes of us?" asked Song Mei sharply.

"We are looking for missing children," explained Jiang Fengmian, saying something for the first time since they had entered the building.

"And how could we help you find them?" asked Song Mei. Shen Jiu quite liked her. She had a spine.

"What can you tell us about Xiong Hong?" asked Shen Jiu.

"Old Master Xiong?" asked Song Mei, surprised. "Not much. He has never visited our establishment."

That was unexpected. Shen Jiu thought the man was a pervert, though he could prefer concubines over whores.

"Is that so?" he probed.

"He is too loyal to his wife," said Dong Ai dreamily. She had a very warm voice. "They had been married for thirty years with no children and only seven years ago did Old Master Xiong take a concubine."

"Tell us more about that concubine," said Shen Jiu. The servants started to bring in food and tea. It was mostly dessert, but it was expected at a place like this.

"She was a sickly girl from a poor family," said Yuan Miu quietly. "Our families were neighbors, though she was younger than me, so I don't remember her well. She died soon after giving birth."

"They say that Madam Xiong had her disposed of," added Song Mei sharply.

"Interesting," said Shen Jiu, and poured himself some tea. His frozen companions followed his lead, still befuddled.

"Do you know anything about the child-stealing spirit?" asked Jiang Fengmian. "Any rumors or old legends would do."

The prostitutes exchanged looks, and Song Mei shook her head.

"We know nothing," she said.

"Truly? Any folktale about children will do," pressured Shen Jiu. He could feel that they knew something.

"It is just that this tale is rather unpalatable," said Yuan Miu.

"Don't worry about our sensitivity. We're the ones asking you to tell. Don't spare us any details," said Shen Jiu.

Yuan Miu looked him in the eye and nodded. "I can tell that you won't be surprised to hear some of that, but I would rather not disturb the children."

"They are future cultivators. They shouldn't be easily disturbed," huffed Shen Jiu.

"There is an old legend. It says that if you are in possession of a child you don't need, you can give it to the spirit of the forest and it will take care of it. Basically, it's the way parents soothed their guilty conscience after leaving their child to die of exposure," said Song Mei.

"Why would anyone abandon their own child?" asked Jiang Yanli. Her eyes were wide open.

"The lives of the poor are harsh, Young Mistress," said Dong Ai kindly. "Sometimes there's not enough food to eat and a child is one more mouth to feed. Sometimes a girl can't keep a child because it will ruin her."

"Sometimes it's better that the child does not exist at all," said Yuan Miu. Shen Jiu could feel there was a story there.

"Do you know anybody who tried to give their child to the spirit of the forest?" asked Shen Jiu.

"There was a girl here. She got with child despite taking measures, so she drank some herbs to get rid of it. The child survived, but when it was born, it was malformed," said Song Mei. "Leaving it there was a mercy."

She looked Shen Jiu in the eye, challenging him silently. He gave her a short nod.

"Did that girl see anything in the forest?" asked Jiang Fengmian. "Anything unusual."

"A shadow," said Song Mei. "When she turned around, the child was gone."

There wasn't much to tell after that. They thanked the workers for their stories, and Shen Jiu finished his tea. He noticed that the Jiangs had barely eaten anything, clearly disturbed. He supposed it wasn't every day that they faced such ugly parts of human existence.

"How much do I need to pay them?" whispered Jiang Fengmian when they were about to leave.

Shen Jiu held out his hand, expecting a money purse to be handed to him. Jiang Fengmian gave it up obediently. Shen Jiu paid generously before returning the purse to its owner.

"Did that woman really leave her child to die?" asked Jiang Yanli quietly. "How could she do that?"

"She was being kind," said Shen Jiu. "Keeping the child in a place like this with no freedom and no prospects in life other than never-ending servitude… that would be selfish."

He glanced at Meng Yao, who hadn't looked up even once the whole time they were at the brothel. It probably brought too many memories.

"You seem strangely familiar with such places and such people," said Jiang Jingheng.

"Think before you speak, Jiang Jingheng!" barked Jiang Fengmian before Shen Jiu could react. His voice was so loud that Shen Jiu flinched. He didn't remember the Sect Leader raising his voice like that before.

"My apologies, Madam Yue," said Jiang Jingheng quickly, his eyes downcast.

Jiang Fengmian ordered Jiang Jingheng to assemble the disciples. When they arrived, two of them said that they had something of interest to report.

"When we gathered to search the town, Yu Bo was absent, and I volunteered to look for him," said the burly disciple.

Shen Jiu pursed his lips. Jiang Jingheng was in charge of the disciples and the fact that he didn't notice one missing didn't speak in his favor. Though with a Sect Leader like Jiang Fengmian, wishing for the head disciple to be competent was probably asking for too much.

"I found him sleeping by the back door," added the burly disciple.

"What's the meaning of this, Yu Bo?" asked Jiang Jingheng.

Yu Bo, a short young man with thick eyebrows, lowered his head in deference. "This Yu Bo couldn't sleep… so I went outside to have some air. Then this one saw Young Master Jiang going outside on his own."

"You saw A-Cheng? Where was he going? Was he truly alone?"

"It was strange. It looked like he was following something or someone, but I couldn't see anything. I tried to stop him but then… I think I fell asleep?"

"If the spirit can put you to sleep, it would explain how you three slept through Jiang Cheng's disappearance," said Shen Jiu.

"We need to search the forest," said Jiang Fengmian. "If it's the same spirit, that's where it has to be."

"Send the disciples. I want to talk to Master Xiong and his wife," said Shen Jiu.

"You can take the children…"

"They won't take me seriously without you," said Shen Jiu.

Jiang Fengmian quite predictably agreed and issued the necessary orders. As the disciples flew to the forest, he, Shen Jiu, and the children walked the familiar road to the Xiong estate.

Madam Xiong was the same age as her husband, her hair silver and her face like a withered rose. She had the air of haughty indifference around her, while her husband was as inviting as the day before.

"Do you have a lead?" he asked eagerly.

"We are still in the middle of the investigation, so I can't tell you the particulars. However, we wanted to ascertain some details," said Jiang Fengmian nodding to Shen Jiu to continue.

"Is it true that Young Master Xiong's mother died soon after his birth?" asked Shen Jiu.

Old Master Xiong looked regretful. "It is true. She was sickly, and the birth wasn't easy on her. It was a tragedy nobody could foresee."

"It's truly unfortunate. It's a good thing that you have another wife, so Young Master Xiong still has a mother," said Shen Jiu.

Old Master Xiong froze, his smile twitching uncomfortably. Madam Xiong looked away. It was all Shen Jiu wanted to know.

"If it's possible, could we talk to Young Master's nanny?" asked Jiang Fengmian. At least he could follow the script well.

"Of course!" said Old Master Xiong, happy to change the subject. "I'll summon her immediately.

"It is for the better if we can speak to her privately. She might be more honest this way," said Jiang Fengmian.

"If I'm no longer needed, I'll go to my quarters," said Madam Xiong, and left the room.

The nanny came quickly, her face pale. She was likely worried that she would be left without a job with the Young Master gone.

"What's your name?" asked Shen Jiu as gently as he could.

The woman looked at him with surprise. "This one is Xiao Yan."

"Xiao Yan, can you tell us more about your Young Master? What is he like?"

"He is a very active boy, always running around and getting in trouble. But you can tell that he is a kind soul. He is the kind to cry over the baby bird that has fallen out of the nest."

"And what's his relationship with his father?" probed Shen Jiu.

"Oh, Master Xiong adores his son! Of course, he can't spend much time with him because he is usually busy, but he makes sure that Young Master Xiong wants for nothing."

"What about Madam Xiong? Does she spend time with her son?" asked Shen Jiu idly.

The nanny's face became grim. "I am afraid that my Mistress doesn't have the time for that."

"Xiao Yan, please, answer the next question honestly. Your answers won't go out of this room, I promise. Do you think that your Mistress could hurt Young Master Xiong?" asked Shen Jiu softly, maintaining eye contact.

The nanny looked conflicted. Then she came closer to him and whispered, "She knows that the heir is needed, so she wouldn't get rid of him. But she is cruel with her words and Young Master shed many tears because of her. I even thought that he could have run away on his own, but the guards would surely see him…"

"Thank you, Xiao Yan, you can go," said Shen Jiu, thinking hard. Of course, the servant could be wrong about her mistress, but it made sense that with the boy gone, Master Xiong could simply find another concubine to impregnate. Keeping the heir they had was in the woman's best interests, even if she couldn't stand the living reminder of the other woman in her house.

Back at the inn, Jiang Fengmian made sure that all the children ate well and that Shen Jiu's cup was full of tea, but he himself hardly had a bite to eat. He looked tense and glanced towards the door every time there was some noise outside. Finally, Jiang Jingheng came back with a report.

"We didn't see anything of note, but two disciples saw a strange shadow. They tried to follow it, but didn't succeed."

"Summon them here," ordered Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu didn't recognise the disciples: two unremarkable young men, one more mousy and the other more scholarly. He drank his tea as they recounted seeing the shadow.

"It was strange that Yu Bo didn't see it," said the scholarly disciple. "He was with us, but said there was nothing there."

It was strange. Shen Jiu recalled that Yu Bo also couldn't see anything when he was following Jiang Cheng. What made some people able to see the spirit while others couldn't?

"Bring Yu Bo here as well," said Jiang Fengmian to Jiang Jingheng.

The children, who were taken, clearly could see the spirit. So could the prostitute from the story and those two adult disciples. There had to be something they had in common.

"I have an idea," said Shen Jiu when Yu Bo came in. "It might sound strange, but I need to know about your background and childhood. And I need you to be honest."

"Do as she says. My son's life is on the line," ordered Jiang Fengmian.

"I come from a big family," said Yu Bo. "I have three sisters, so all the hopes of my parents are put on me. I do my best not to disappoint them. My childhood was unremarkable, I suppose. I trained a lot and studied a lot, got into some trouble. The usual things."

"I am the second son," said the scholarly disciple. "My elder brother is a very strong cultivator and my parents expected me to be the same. I spent a large part of my childhood trying to earn their love fruitlessly, but now I know it was meaningless."

It was unexpected to hear such honesty even though they asked for it. Jiang Fengmian must've thought the same because he looked like somebody had slapped him on the face.

"I am an orphan," said the mousy disciple. "I was raised by my aunt. I earned my keep and left as soon as I could."

Peasant children from big families. A prostitute abandoning her child. Young Master Xiong loved by his busy father and hated by his step-mother. Two disciples who didn't feel loved…

"I think I know how that spirit works," said Shen Jiu, putting his cup down. Everybody looked at him expectantly.

"It's either a forest spirit or a local deity who was fed abandoned children for years. It must have started to seek its own food. But it only takes those who feel abandoned and unloved."

"But why would it take A-Cheng?" asked Jiang Fengmian helplessly.

"How could you ask that? After you treated him like he didn't matter for years, what did you expect A-Cheng to feel?" At this moment Jiang Yanli sounded a lot like her mother, her voice as sharp as a whip lash.

"A-Li…" started Jiang Fengmian but he couldn't let out anything else staring at his daughter as if it was the first time he saw her.

"You hardly ever praise him, hardly ever touch him! I would understand if you were a distant person, but you are different with the other disciples. Do you know how many tears I had to dry? How many times I had to lie? I told A-Cheng a hundred times that you love him, and I didn't even believe my own words!"

"Of course I love A-Cheng!"

"Have you ever told him? Have you ever shown him? If A-Cheng dies, it will be your fault!"

Jiang Yanli stood up and walked out of the room.

"A-Li, where are you going!?" called for her Jiang Fengmian.

"To my room. Don't return without A-Cheng. If something happens to him, I'll never forgive you."

"Could you stay with her?" asked Jiang Fengmian, looking lost.

"Of course," said Shen Jiu. "Let's go, boys."

They found Jiang Yanli in their room, hunched over and crying gracelessly. Shen Jiu froze, unsure how to calm her down. As he faltered, Meng Yao was the one who stepped forward, gently putting a hand on Jiang Yanli's shoulder.

"At least now we know what took him," he said softly. "They will bring Jiang Cheng back to you."

"Will they? So far they have been useless."

"Then we should go save Jiang Cheng!" said Wei Ying.

Shen Jiu looked at the boy incredulously. "What are you talking about? You don't even have a sword, and you think you can fight the unknown spirit? An attitude like this will get you killed."

Jiang Yanli froze. "No, I think he is right. What we need is bait. I can be one."

"Your father will never agree," said Shen Jiu.

"I won't ask him."

"Are you insane?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously. "If you don't have somebody to protect you, you will just feed yourself to the spirit."

"Maybe… Maybe you could protect me, Master Shen. You are a cultivator."

She sure was her father's daughter.

"I am only one person. I don't have my own sword, and you have never seen me fight. And you think I am enough to protect you?"

"Let's speak to Sect Leader Jiang," offered Meng Yao gently. "Perhaps he will agree to Shijie's idea. After all, the disciples had seen nothing but a shadow when they searched the forest. Most people can't even see this spirit."

Shen Jiu didn't like this course of action. The bait idea was a sound one, but Shen Jiu was concerned that Jiang Fengmian would decide to use another bait. Why endanger his daughter when there is a perfectly suitable orphan running around? And the stupid brat would even agree!

He was going to order them to stay put, but Meng Yao gave him a pleading look and Shen Jiu softened. It would be a pity if Jiang Cheng perished. And they would have to find another place to live because otherwise Yu Ziyuan would kill them all, starting with Jiang Fengmian.

When they went out, the scholarly disciple from before was guarding the door outside.

"The others left to search the forest again. The Sect Leader told me to look out for the spirit, so it wouldn't target Young Mistress Jiang," he explained.

So he decided to leave one of the people who could see the spirit behind. Brilliant. His logic was that to protect Jiang Yanli the disciple would need to see the spirit, but how was the Sect Leader planning to look for it in the forest with only one pair of eyes that could reliably see it?

"Take us to the Sect Leader. Young Mistress Jiang has a suggestion for him," said Shen Jiu.

"But…"

"I'll take all the responsibility. Just take us to him, so we don't have to look ourselves."

The disciple took them to the forest. This immediately uncovered a problem. Jiang Fengmian and his disciples had already entered it, so to speak to him, they would have to enter the forest themselves. Shen Jiu had three children with him who could attract that spirit, so he had a suspicion that the spirit could find them before they found Jiang Fengmian.

"Do you have an emergency talisman?" asked Shen Jiu.

The disciple procured four such talismans from his sleeve and handed them out.

"Alright, let's go. If the spirit comes out, we will just have to use the talisman and wait for help."

If the help was late Shen Jiu, could try using demonic cultivation against the spirit. He wasn't sure about its nature, but if he could summon the ghosts of the abandoned children it could theoretically slow the spirit down enough for them to escape.

The forest was unremarkable. Just like any other forest Shen Jiu had the misfortune to walk through. He used his cultivation not to sink in the dirt. Someone might say it was a waste of qi but he would rather not dirty his shoes.

"Does the acorn I found yesterday come from this forest?" asked Wei Ying idly.

When he first found it, Shen Jiu didn't pay it any mind, but now…

"Can you give it here for a moment?" he asked sharply.

"Oh, I gave it to Jiang Cheng so he wouldn't be sad. He said it was a shitty gift, but he took it anyway," said Wei Ying brightly.

Damn it. Perhaps that was how the spirit connected to the boy. Through the damn acorn! Shen Jiu clenched his teeth. Somehow allowing the brat to keep some garbage he had found led to the abduction of the Sect Leader's heir. Shen Jiu would have to make sure it didn't reach Jiang Fengmian's ears.

It didn't take them long to find a disciple. The man's eyes widened when he saw them, but he ran off to find the Sect Leader without complaint. Jiang Fengmian had a frown on his face.

"What are you doing here?" he asked curtly.

Jiang Yanli relayed her plan quickly, but Shen Jiu could see from the pained look on Jiang Fengmian's face that he would not agree.

"A-Li, it is too dangerous for you to get involved. Please return to the inn and stay there. We can find A-Cheng without you."

"Can you though?" asked Shen Jiu sharply. "You have only one disciple with you who can see the spirit reliably. How are you going to find it?"

"So you want me to endanger my daughter to save my son? Would you do the same if it were Wei Ying and Yue Yao?"

"Of course I would!" said Shen Jiu before he could even think about it. "Because the alternative is to waste time and hope for the best, and hoping for the best never works because this world is cruel and unfair."

There was a shadow on the right. One blink and it was gone.

"Have you seen that?" he asked. The children shook their heads.

"It went that way. Let's go," said Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian didn't argue.

As they walked through the forest all together, Shen Jiu saw the shadow again. This time he got a better look. It was large, with something that looked like antlers or branches sticking out of it.

"Here it is," he said.

"You can see it?" asked Jiang Yanli. Apparently, she didn't feel as unloved as her brother.

"I can. Can anyone else?" asked Shen Jiu, still following it. The children shook their heads. For a moment he slowed down, surprised.

He supposed Meng Yao still thought he had his mother, though Shen Jiu was a subpar substitute, for sure. But why wouldn't Wei Ying feel abandoned? His parents died years ago and the only adult he had in his life was Shen Jiu.

"I can see it," said Jiang Fengmian tensely. Shen Jiu did not have the time to analyse that information. The shadow sped up significantly, and the Sect Leader ran after it, leaving them no choice but to follow him. They ran until they stopped at a clearing, breathing heavily after all the running.

"I've lost it," said Jiang Fengmian. "Have you seen where it has gone?"

Shen Jiu shook his head. Jiang Fengmian swore under his breath.

"I have an idea, but it is unorthodox," said Shen Jiu.

"Any idea is a good idea now."

"We both can see the spirit for our own reasons. I assume that if we meditate on those reasons, bringing them to the surface, it might lure the spirit to us. Then we either negotiate with it or attack it. It depends on how sentient it is."

"Alright. It's the best plan we have right now. I'll summon the disciples so they can form a protective circle around us. A-Li, I'll have to send you and the boys back to the inn. Please don't argue."

"Please just bring A-Cheng back," pleaded Jiang Yanli.

"I promise." Shen Jiu felt sick to the stomach.

The forest was silent as they settled down on the grass in front of each other. The Jiang disciples were hiding in the woods around the clearing, ready to interfere if something happened. By now the children had to be safely out of the forest, not that they seemed to interest the spirit. Shen Jiu closed his eyes.

It didn't take much for Shen Jiu to bring up that day in his mind. The face of the man he had thought long dead, splattered with Wu Yanzi's blood. The realisation that even Qi-ge gave up on him. That if somebody as kind as Qi-ge didn't care then there had to be something wrong with him. Perhaps his parents could feel it too when they decided to sell him?

He focused on the hollow feeling in his chest, feeling it swallow him whole.

Suddenly, he could hear a child laugh. Shen Jiu opened his eyes and was almost blinded by the sun. There were now yellow flowers in the clearing and the sky was clean and bright blue. Jiang Cheng was chasing a small child around the clearing, making the boy squeal happily.

"A-Cheng!" shouted Jiang Fengmian. He ran to his son and dropped to his knees, hugging the boy close. Jiang Cheng looked baffled.

"Father? What are you doing here?"

"We came to save you," explained Jiang Fengmian.

"Save me? Why would you save me? It's just a dream."

"It's not a dream! You disappeared, A-Cheng. We have been looking for you the whole day and I didn't know whether you were…"

"What's your name?" While the Jiangs were having their moment, Shen Jiu decided to ascertain the identity of the other child.

"Xiong Ping," said the boy shyly. "Are you Cheng-ge's mother?"

Shen Jiu choked on his own spit and shook his head.

"But if it's not a dream, how do we leave?" asked Jiang Cheng, blissfully changing the topic.

"We need to speak to the one who brought us here," said Shen Jiu. "Show yourself!"

A big figure moved out of the woods. It looked like a hill, covered with moss and rock. There were branches sticking out of its back like wings. It had four limbs and something like a head, but it had no face. Still, Shen Jiu could feel its gaze.

"Let us leave," ordered Shen Jiu.

An old scratchy voice spoke in his head. It was disturbingly similar to the way the System worked. "You are safe here. You are loved here. Stay here forever."

"If we are safe here, then where are the other children?" asked Shen Jiu.

Jiang Fengmian frowned and took Jiang Cheng's wrist in his hand. Then he grabbed the wrist of Xiong Ping.

"They are sustained by their own qi. It is like a forced state of inedia, but once the qi runs out…"

"The children die," concluded Shen Jiu. "Let us leave. We don't want to die like your other charges."

"It is better here. No one wants you there. No-one loves you there. Stay here."

"You are wrong," said Jiang Fengmian. "You took A-Cheng because he felt unloved. It is my fault that he felt this way and I will apologise a million times if I need to. I love him. His mother loves him. And his sister loves him so much she was willing to risk her own life to bring him home."

"A-Jie," whispered Jiang Cheng weakly. There were tears in his eyes.

"Xiong Ping's father is beside himself with worry, looking for his son," added Shen Jiu. "His step-mother made him feel unloved, but his father cares for him and so does his nanny. You need to let him go."

"The world is cruel. The world is unfair. Stay here."

It was one stubborn spirit. It also genuinely seemed to want to help them. Just like that girl.

"You must be the master of this forest," said Shen Jiu. "For years you protected it, but when the people who settled here started to bring you children to protect as well. So, you brought them here and tried to keep them safe and happy until they withered away and died."

He needed to find out the source of the spirit's corruption or they would never leave.

"Why did you start taking the children that weren't brought to you? Did you want to protect them? Or did you want to punish their parents? But their parents didn't want them in the first place. They weren't sad that they were gone."

"They are better here with us!" There was an echo in the spirit's voice as if there were a hundred voices joining together. A hundred ghosts of the children left to die by those who were supposed to care for them. As they were connected to the spirit Shen Jiu hadn't felt their resentment, but once he got them angry it sprang out.

"Are those ghosts?" asked Jiang Fengmian, who must have noticed the same thing.

"Any idea how to banish them?"

"Not that many and not at the same time. I don't have enough talismans."

"What's going on?" asked Jiang Cheng, who was now perched on his father's arm, looking dazed.

For years the locals had abandoned their children in this forest, asking the local deity to take them in. But it doesn't know how to keep humans alive, so the children died and their souls corrupted the deity," explained Jiang Fengmian.

"Now I am going to try something. If you banish me for it, I will tell your wife everything that happened here, you understand?" asked Shen Jiu.

"Yes?" said Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu started to sing. It was the first melody he had ever heard, the one sung to him by his San-jie. He barely remembered her, but he could almost feel her hand on his head as he sang the familiar tune. The words were graceless and meaningless, something made up by a child who had never heard a proper lullaby. But it served his purpose well.

Resentment seeped from every syllable. Resentment for San-jie's fate, for his own fate, for the fate of every unfortunate child who was there with them. He saw it curling around him like smoke and for a moment he felt relieved. He only tried this with a qin and he couldn't be sure that singing would work.

The small flickers of resentment flew out of the spirit's large body and joined the whirlwind around Shen Jiu. He kept singing. When the air around him was so black he could hardly see, he changed the tune. He imagined Meng Yao in the forest, when they were on the run from the brothel, and sang for him.

Sleep child, I won't let this wretched world harm you.
Sleep child, I am here with you and I will stay.
Sleep child…

The black smoke slowed down and was soon dispersed by the wind. They were surrounded by the terrified-looking Jiang disciples. There were no flowers and the sky was gray. Jiang Fengmian still had his son in his arms, holding him tight. Xiong Ping stuck close to them. There was a hill of bones laid out in the middle of the clearing.

Things happened quickly after that. The disciples were ordered to bury the bones and give them proper burial rites. Meanwhile, Shen Jiu and Jiang Fengmian returned Xiong Ping to his tearful father. Before they left, Jiang Fengmian said something to Old Master Xiong quietly and the man's face became as white as his moustache.

Back in the inn, Jiang Yanli hugged Jiang Cheng close to her and refused to let him go even as the night approached, so Jiang Fengmian permitted her to stay with him and the boys, ignoring propriety. It felt strange staying alone in his room after everything that had happened, so Shen Jiu came to check on the children.

When he came in, the children were already asleep, while Jiang Fengmian was sitting behind the folding screen with three open jars of wine in front of him.

"They are asleep," said Jiang Fengmian, who must've guessed why Shen Jiu came. "Drink with me?"

His first instinct was to refuse. Shen Jiu only allowed himself to drink when he was surrounded by trustworthy people and he hardly knew Jiang Fengmian despite his familiar face. He also couldn't stand drunk men in general. They were simply disgusting. However, that could be the way he could get those Lore Points the System had mentioned.

"Alright," said Shen Jiu, and sat down on the opposite side of the table, accepting a cup full of wine.

"What is the reason for this?" he asked, nodding at the jars.

Jiang Fengmian sighed. "This night hunt… I am just glad it's over."

"It was unpleasant," agreed Shen Jiu, and drunk the contents of his cup in one gulp, feeling the burn in his stomach. After everything that had happened, he had no appetite, so he barely ate anything during the supper.

"I didn't know Jiang Cheng felt this way. Am I really that bad a father that he didn't know I love him?"

"I wouldn't know anything about fathers. Or mothers," said Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian poured him another cup but he didn't hurry to drink yet, still wincing at the terrible aftertaste. Whatever that wine was, it tasted like cat piss. You would think a Sect Leader could buy something better for himself.

"You are a good mother. Neither A-Ying nor A-Yao could see the spirit, so they must feel loved."

"I have no idea why they would."

"Because you do that thing…" Jiang Fengmian waved his hand strangely. He was drunk already.

"What thing?"

"The parent thing. I can't do it. Even with A-Li it's hard, and A-Cheng…" Jiang Fengmian didn't finish, pouring himself more wine. Shen Jiu took a small sip and winced. How did Jiang Fengmian drink the crap?

"You are perfectly fine with the younger disciples. They like you because you are all smiles and hair-ruffling."

"Because they are disciples! All I need to do is teach them cultivation and sword forms and… archery. Those are the only things I am good at, so it's easy! But how am I supposed to teach A-Cheng to be a sect leader, when I am… I am…"

"A pushover?" suggested Shen Jiu, amused at the lack of eloquence.

"Yes! My father always called me that. Said he didn't know how I would lead the sect, and he was right. If it wasn't for Yu Ziyuan… She should be the Sect Leader!"

At least the man understood his faults.

"Well, you can't just ignore your son because you don't know how to raise him. Do you think I know how to raise children? I have no idea what I am doing, but I still do it because nobody else is going to."

Meng Shi gave him her body so he owed it to her to raise Meng Yao. And Wei Ying was better off with him than with the Jiangs, who didn't know what to do with their own children.

"But what if I ruin him? My father was a great sect leader but he still couldn't beat it into me how to be one."

With his face red and his glassy eyes opened wide like an owl Jiang Fengmian didn't look like Yue Qingyuan that much.

"I don't think you should take your father as an example of good parenting considering that you could see that spirit just like I did."

"You are right. He was terrible! You know, I used to daydream about running away from home and becoming a rogue cultivator."

"Why didn't you?"

"I was afraid, I suppose. That I would give up my inheritance and be left with nothing. My friends are dead, my wife hates me, and my children think I don't love them. But at least I have the money and the title and all the responsibility that comes with it."

Shen Jiu felt a pang of irritation. That man had no idea what it was like not to have anything.

"Don't dramatise. Your children will know you love them if you show it, and your wife doesn't hate you."

Jiang Fengmian tried to pour himself another cup, but the jar was empty so he took out another one from under the table.

"She can't stay in the same room with me without having an argument," he said.

"What did you expect? She thinks I am your lover, or what you want me to be your lover…" Shen Jiu was beginning to feel the effect of alcohol. He didn't like it.

"I was just trying to make you feel welcome, because you are important… and I don't want you to leave…please, don't leave," Jiang Fengmian began to slur his words. Drinking on an empty stomach was a sure way to get wasted quickly, and Shen Jiu hadn't seen the man eat the whole day.

"Are you sure you don't want me to be your lover?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously. He didn't think it was lust he saw, but it didn't hurt to make sure.

"You are beautiful, but I already disappoint one woman every day. Why would I want to disappoint another one?"

He said it with such tragic seriousness that Shen Jiu couldn’t help but laugh at him.

Jiang Fengmian smiled unevenly. "When you laugh, you look even more like her."

After that he slumped down face-first on the table.

"Like who?" asked Shen Jiu, poking Jiang Fengmian with one finger. He heard a snore and shook his head. It was time to return to his own room. Shen Jiu drank the remnants of the awful wine from his cup and left.

Chapter 14: The price of freedom.

Shen Jiu ignored Jiang Fengmian's offered hand and stepped out of the carriage onto the mud below. His cultivation kept him from sinking into the mud and kept his shoes clean, but he still had to slightly raise the hem of his robes. It was the first time he wore Jiang Fengmian's gift, and it still felt strange to look down and see purple instead of green.

"Stop treating me like some dainty maiden, and take care of the children before they ruin their clothes," hissed Shen Jiu behind his fan. Jiang Fengmian quickly complied, catching Wei Ying by the scruff of his neck before he could land on the ground and splatter everything with mud.

The main gate of the Yao Sect's residence must have been diligently polished before their arrival. There was simply no other explanation for the shine of the blue-lacquered archway and the golden letters on it: "Thousand Springs Hall."

Shen Jiu covered a smirk with his fan. That would be a good name for a brothel.

Two disciples were standing in front of the main gate, carefully trying to maintain the air of professionalism and failing miserably. Shen Jiu could see them crane their necks to get a better look at the Jiang entourage. The guards bowed low as soon as they saw Jiang Fengmian, opening the gates with haste.

The Hall of Thousand Springs was a third of the size of Lotus Pier, but it was to be expected of a minor sect. Despite the small size, everything seemed tasteful and well-maintained, showing that the Sect was doing well for itself.

With its picturesque location in the mountainous area full of icy cold springs one would expect the air to be fresh and clear, but instead it smelt of smoke. It must have come from the smithy that Shen Jiu noticed not far away from the main gate. Yao Sect was known for producing reliable swords, which were in high demand among other minor sects due to their relatively low cost.

A small group of disciples in dark blue robes was awaiting them in front of the main building. In its centre stood a man dressed more elaborately than the rest, which signified his elevated status. The Yao procession bowed as soon as they approached, their movements smooth and well-trained.

"Sect Leader Jiang," said the man at the center. "We have been awaiting your arrival."

Now it was the Jiang entourage's turn to bow. "Young Master Yao," greeted Jiang Fengmian.

So this was the heir of the sect. The man seemed to be in his late twenties, so his father was likely a contemporary of the previous Sect Leader Jiang. Shen Jiu considered the possible difficulties it could cause during the negotiation. He remembered the trouble he and other Peak Lords dealt with when they had to negotiate with Sect Leaders who were much older

than them and therefore considered themselves more knowledgeable. The Huan Hua Palace Master was especially annoying to work with.

"My father will formally greet you during the welcoming ceremony, but before that, you can refresh at the guest quarters. Allow our disciples to lead you there."

"That would be quite welcome," said Jiang Fengmian. "Could you arrange for my daughter to stay together with her teacher, and for my son to stay with his two friends?"

The children were still shaken after their encounter with the child-stealing spirit, so it was a wise request. There was a mirror in the quarters Shen Jiu and Jiang Yanli were assigned, and Shen Jiu made a point to check his makeup. He had to look perfect before their meeting with the sect leader, and for a woman makeup was an indispensable part of attire and a clear demonstration of status.

Sun Peizhi was shocked when her house guest took off the mourning clothes and didn't immediately buy rouge and other products, so she offered to share her own. When Shen Jiu tried applying it, the result was so horrendous that Sun Peizhi immediately clued in on his inexperience and taught him how to do it appropriately. He found himself enjoying despite his initial reluctance.

The smell of the feast was so strong that it could be smelt well before they reached the reception hall. As they entered they were once again met with the Yao Sect heir, who took them to welcome his father, a pudgy old man with a pronounced limp. He took his time studying Shen Jiu during the greetings, putting him on edge from the start.

The seating arrangement was questionable to say the least. The Sect Leader said that "the honored teacher" should sit at one table with the Jiangs and the Yao main family, which was somewhat acceptable. However, it placed Shen Jiu in the seat that would be reserved for Yu Ziyuan had she come. Most troubling was the fact that Meng Yao and Wei Ying were also asked to join the main table, though logically they should be sitting with the other disciples. The rumors must have already reached the Yao Sect, and it didn't speak well for their future at Lotus Pier.

Shen Jiu was so deep in thought that he almost missed Sect Leader Yao make a toast praising the Jiang Sect. The wine tasted sour on his tongue.

"I admit that when I heard that you were taking the children with you, I expected to see your honored aunt," said Sect Leader Yao.

"My aunt is getting on in years, so I could not burden her with the education of my children any longer. Luckily Madam Shen agreed to take this duty, and she is more than qualified," said Jiang Fengmian.

"It is most curious! Madam Shen, your poise and grace are undeniable, but I cannot recall a noble family named Shen."

Bastard.

"This one's roots are humble. However, this one was blessed to receive education, which allows me to be of use to the Jiang Sect," said Shen Jiu demurely.

"My son tells me that you got in trouble on your way here," prompted Sect Leader Yao, giving Jiang Fengmian an opportunity to change the topic and talk about their night hunt. He omitted the exact particulars of the spirit's nature and claimed to have subdued it with talismans alone, but the story was convincing. Apparently Jiang Fengmian was a decent liar when he needed to be.

The story inspired Sect Leader Yao to regale them with the story of his last night hunt, which happened ten years ago and was the reason for his limp. The arrival of the announcer interrupted the murmur of fake concern that had filled their table after the story.

"The most beautiful flowers are here tonight to provide entertainment for our honored guests!" said the announcer, ushering in a row of women dressed like dancers and another group holding musical instruments.

Shen Jiu wholeheartedly welcomed the distraction from the droning conversation until his gaze stumbled on a familiar face. He hadn't seen Sisi since the day of the fire, and now here she was, looking right back at him. Shen Jiu used his fan to cover his face, but it was already too late.

The women began their dance, moving in tune with a gentle melody. They danced like flower petals in the gentle gusts of summer wind, but Shen Jiu didn't have the right state of mind to appreciate the show. He needed to speak to Sisi to make sure she wouldn't speak to the wrong person about him. This definitely wasn't something he could leave to chance alone.

He covered his mouth with his fan and stepped on Jiang Fengmian's foot to draw his attention. "Find out where those dancers come from," he whispered.

Jiang Fengmian did not react in any way, but once the dance was over, he said, "Those dancers are extremely skilled. Are they locals?"

"They are a traveling troupe. "Wandering Blossoms" is their name. You must have seen them perform at the wedding of Sect Leader Ouyang's eldest son. They are quite well-known."

"Oh, now that you mention it, I remember," said Jiang Fengmian.

"Speaking of weddings, have you considered my offer?" asked Sect Leader Yao. The man's daughter sighed on the other side of the table, but did not say anything. She was a woman in her late twenties, which explained her father's eagerness. However, she showed no interest in Jiang Fengmian during the banquet, so Shen Jiu suspected there was no need to dissuade her in particular.

Jiang Fengmian tensed at the question. "It's hardly appropriate to discuss something of this much importance now."

"Then we will return to this conversation during the negotiation," said Sect Leader Yao. Luckily for them another course was brought right after that, distracting the old man from the

topic of weddings altogether.

The negotiation was scheduled for noon next day, likely to account for overindulgence during the welcoming banquet. Shen Jiu had seen how much Sect Leader Yao had drunk, and that couldn’t be healthy even for a cultivator.

Shen Jiu was heading to the library, where his students were waiting for their lesson, however, his plans were interrupted by Jiang Jingheng, who ordered him to go to Jiang Fengmian’s rooms. Shen Jiu was not amused by this turn of events in the slightest.

"What are you doing? Are the current rumors not enough for you?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously.

"Don’t worry about it. Jiang Jingheng is keeping watch," said Jiang Fengmian. "I just need you to know that I will protect you no matter what truth comes to light."

He seemed earnest as he said it, but that wasn’t a good enough reason to trust him.

"What are you talking about? What truth?" asked Shen Jiu, prepared to lie his way out of it no matter what.

"I didn’t know how to broach this subject, but the circumstances leave me no choice. I knew your mother and your older brother. That’s how I know that your father had sold you when you were a child. And… based on that, I can assume what your past was like, so you don’t have to hide it from me."

"My mother? And my brother?" Shen Jiu had no idea what the man was talking about, but he didn’t like where this conversation was going.

"You bear a striking resemblance to my old nanny, who was also the mother of my best friend, Wei Changze. He spoke about his younger sister only once, but he always wished he could find you. By a lucky turn of fate, I have done that in his stead. That’s why I am going to do anything in my power to protect you."

This man was delusional. However, Shen Jiu couldn’t say no to protection when he needed it desperately. And as an aunt he would have a bigger claim on Wei Ying than the Jiang, so when they had to leave he would be able to take the brat. Perhaps Jiang Fengmian was right and Meng Shi was Wei Changze’s sister. It was not like Shen Jiu could prove it wrong.

"I don’t remember my birth family," he said honestly, deliberately playing into the man’s delusion.

"They were lovely people. Your mother and your brother meant the world to me, so if you are in trouble, you can rely on me. I owe it to them to help you."

For a moment, Shen Jiu looked in Jiang Fengmian’s earnest eyes and thought about trust. He made a point not to rely on other people, but he really did need help and he had a feeling that there wouldn’t be any strings attached in this case. Jiang Fengmian was a weak man who clung too tightly to his past, but that made him reliable.

"I need to arrange a clandestine meeting with a girl from the dancing troupe named Li Sisi. Can you help me with that?"

"Consider it done," said Jiang Fengmian confidently, and Shen Jiu felt a weight lift off his shoulders.

After that, Shen Jiu went directly to the library where his students awaited. He was taken here on a pretext of being the children's teacher, so he was going to teach, no matter what else was happening.

"This lesson is going to be somewhat practical," said Shen Jiu as he looked at the eager faces of his students. "Can anyone tell me why we came to the Yao sect?"

"We need to renegotiate an old contract because the Yao Sect hasn't been following it," said Jiang Cheng.

"Correct," said Shen Jiu. "And what does the old contract say?"

"The Tianzhou village and the surrounding land belong to Yunmeng Jiang Sect, however, it's too far away from Lotus Pier. It is relatively close to the Yao Sect's residence, so it was agreed that the Yao Sect would protect Tianzhou and in exchange they would be permitted to mine ore in the region," explained Meng Yao.

"That's a functional summary. Now tell me what were the breaches of the contract?"

"Yao Sect did not protect Tianzhou the way it should on multiple documented occasions," said Jiang Yanli. "People died, property was destroyed, and Yunmeng Jiang took the blame."

"That's right. And why in your opinion did that happen?" That was the most important question.

"Maybe Yao Sect is too busy protecting their own territory," suggested Wei Ying.

"They could very well have bitten more than they can chew, but that's not exactly the problem here," said Shen Jiu.

"They don't want to waste resources protecting the land that doesn't belong to them and brings them no glory, so their own territory gets precedence," said Meng Yao.

"That's it. And what was Yunmeng Jiang's main mistake that allowed it to happen?"

"The Tianzhou region wasn't monitored after the contract was made, so the breaches of contract were noticed too late," said Jiang Yanli.

"Yue Yao, Jiang Cheng, you represent the Yao Sect delegation. Jiang Yanli, Wei Ying, you represent the Jiang clan. Negotiate a new contract using the information you know."

It was difficult not to laugh at the resulting mess. As expected, Meng Yao was ruthless in his approach, twisting the facts in a way that made Yao Sect seem like an innocent party. Jiang

Cheng also made good suggestions once he got over the fact that he had to fight against his own sect's interests.

Jiang Yanli struggled to fend off their arguments, despite the truth being on their side. Wei Ying was helpful at the beginning, but the longer the exercise continued, the more indignant he became at the injustice of it all. In fact, he got so loud that Shen Jiu had to disqualify him before the discussion ended.

Despite the laborious work of both sides, they failed to come to an agreement until the hour was over and Shen Jiu stopped them, pleased with the results. "What did you learn today?"

"You can't shout at the negotiation," said Wei Ying sullenly. Shen Jiu had to suppress a smile.

"It depends on who you are, but generally you can't. What else?"

"Being in the right doesn't give you an advantage," said Jiang Cheng.

Shen Jiu nodded sharply. "You are taught to be righteous, so you expect everybody to behave the same way. However, there is no righteousness in politics."

The exercise had a secondary function of demonstrating the possible avenues for the future negotiation. Shen Jiu couldn't deny now that his presence was needed. Jiang Fengmian needed the help of someone who wasn't afraid to play dirty.

Sect Leader Yao clearly didn't expect the children's teacher to take part in the negotiation. His eyes widened as soon as he saw Shen Jiu enter with Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Jingheng, and he asked dubiously, "Is the negotiation table truly an appropriate place for a woman?"

"Why wouldn't it be?" said Jiang Fengmian with feigned confusion. "My wife often takes part in negotiations as you know. Since she wasn't able to join us, I thought Madam Shen could offer her perspective instead."

"How unorthodox," said Sect Leader Yao, his face twisted as if he had sucked on a lemon.

Once the negotiation began, the need for Shen Jiu's presence became clear. Jiang Fengmian wasn't a bad negotiator: his arguments were well-thought-out and his calm manner did not provoke any undue tension. However, he was noticeably too soft. The Yao started to bemoan their stretched resources and the fact that mining the ore required additional labor and expenditure, and Jiang Fengmian was ready to forgive their contractual failures without any repercussions.

"And what of the people who lost their lives because the Yao Sect couldn't be there when they were needed?" asked Shen Jiu, fanning himself idly. This movement used to visibly frustrate Liu Qingge, and he noted the mirror of this anger on Sect Leader Yao's face with some satisfaction.

"Deaths happen, unfortunately, and no cultivation sect can save everyone," answered Sect Leader Yao.

"But it is true that the Jiang Sect would have sent aid, if we knew that you didn't have enough resources to protect Tianzhou," said Jiang Fengmian. "It is only fair that you help with rebuilding. A lot of people lost their homes after the last yao beast's attack."

"This can be included in the new contract," conceded Sect Leader Yao.

The negotiation went on for hours, but predictably they didn't manage to reach a full agreement and would continue the next day.

"I've found out where the Wandering Blossoms are staying and arranged a meeting for you with that friend of yours," said Jiang Fengmian quietly after they had left the negotiation table. "I have also informed Sect Leader Yao that I wished to take the children to town and that we will take supper there."

That would make Shen Jiu's visit less likely to be noticed.

"Good," said Shen Jiu. The only problem would be finding an opportunity to talk to Sisi in private, but he was sure he could think of something.

The children seemed delighted to go out, making too much noise for Shen Jiu's taste. From their reaction, one could think that they had never been to a market.

"This lady is selling fried grasshoppers! Can we have some, Shizun?" said Wei Ying too loudly. He was definitely spoiled if he felt free to demand things like that.

"I thought people eat those only when there is a famine," said Jiang Yanli, eyeing the stall curiously.

"How could people eat that? It's disgusting!" said Jiang Cheng.

"When you have nothing to eat, you can't be picky with your food, A-Cheng," said Jiang Fengmian, but Shen Jiu noticed slight disgust on his face.

Shen Jiu handed Wei Ying the money silently. It was money well spent. The two Jiang men made hilarious faces when they had to watch Wei Ying eat the insects and when Jiang Yanli decided to try one.

"It's quite delicious," she said thoughtfully. Jiang Cheng looked betrayed.

Then Wei Ying had a brilliant idea of daring Jiang Cheng to eat a grasshopper. From the look of the boy's face, he was fully expecting the insect to start moving, but he still put it in his mouth. Shen Jiu had to cover his mouth with his fan. Meng Yao and Jiang Yanli couldn't contain their laughter.

"Would you like to try one as well, Sect Leader Jiang?" asked Shen Jiu politely.

The man's eyes widened in horror. "Ah, no, thank you. Let the children… enjoy themselves."

Just as expected, the son was much braver than his father, but Shen Jiu already knew that. He thought Jiang Cheng would be a more than decent Sect Leader in the future.

After they had all eaten, Shen Jiu said, "I need to make a few personal purchases. Would you mind watching the children?"

"Of course," said Jiang Fengmian. "We can meet here in an hour or so, so you have enough time."

Shen Jiu turned to leave, but stopped when he felt something tug on his sleeve.

"Mother, can I come with you?"

"Don’t you want to stay with your friends?" asked Shen Jiu.

From the determined look in Meng Yao’s eyes, it was clear that he knew where Shen Jiu was going and wasn’t going to stay behind willingly.

"I’d rather go with you," he said simply. His eyes shone pleadingly. Did he think Shen Jiu would be easily swayed by such tactics? Impertinent brat.

"Alright," scoffed Shen Jiu. "But don’t complain if you get bored."

They walked until the Jiangs and Wei Ying were safely out of sight. Only then did Shen Jiu lead Meng Yao away from the market, heading to the town’s cheapest inn. Instead of entering it through the main gate, they went straight to the back door. A servant was already waiting for them there.

"Everything is prepared for your arrival. Please, follow me," she said, bowing to them deeply. Shen Jiu wondered how much money Jiang Fengmian had paid to arrange this meeting. It was definitely too much.

The servant took them to a small, surprisingly clean room, where Sisi was already waiting for them. She stood up as soon as they entered. She had a frown on her face when she looked at Shen Jiu, but when she turned her eyes to Meng Yao, her face softened.

"You grew up so much, A-Yao," she said, smiling at the child.

"Should I bring tea?" asked the servant girl nervously.

"No need. Leave us," said Shen Jiu. They didn’t have much time before they would have to return.

"Didn’t think I’d see Meng Shi ordering servants around like a proper lady," said Sisi. It sounded like a reproach.

"It’s Shen Shi and Yue Yao now," corrected Shen Jiu. "But if anyone asks, pretend that you don’t know us at all."

"So your lover doesn’t know that you are a runaway prostitute?" asked Sisi.

"What lover?"

"That cultivator in purple. Don’t tell me you aren’t sleeping with him! I’ve seen you two whispering during the banquet."

"I simply asked him to find out about your troupe, so I could speak to you," said Shen Jiu defensively. Did they really look like lovers to outsiders? That was a problem he would have to deal with later.

"Mother is now a teacher for the Jiang Sect. And I’m a guest disciple," said Meng Yao, his voice brimming with pride.

"You did well for yourselves," said Sisi. When she looked at Shen Jiu, her eyes remained cold.

"You don’t seem happy to see me," said Shen Jiu.

"After what you’ve done? Be grateful I didn’t go to the authorities."

"Aunt Sisi," gasped Meng Yao.

"I would assume you’d be thankful. A dancer is still a more acceptable occupation than a prostitute," said Shen Jiu bitterly.

"I was lucky, but not all of us were. After the fire, we had nowhere to go and not many people are decent enough to help our kind."

"I gave you your freedom back."

"What use has freedom if you will gladly sell yourself again just to have a roof over your head and food in your belly?! And that’s to say nothing about Madam Meng…"

"Don’t tell me you pity her!" said Shen Jiu incredulously.

"You killed a human being, Meng Shi. Don’t you feel remorse? She was like a mother to you!"

"She bought me!"

"She favored you! You got the best tutors, the best clothes… you were even allowed to pick your clients until you got pregnant! And she let you keep the child, when you did."

"Because she wanted another worker. Don’t make her sound charitable."

"She only thought of that because you stopped earning money. If you returned to work…"

"If I returned to work, I would have just worked myself to death! And what would happen to A-Yao then?"

As far as Shen Jiu knew that was what had happened to real Meng Shi in the book. And then Meng Yao went to his father’s sect and was kicked down the stairs for all his trouble. Thinking about it made his blood boil.

"Mother, Aunt Sisi, please don't argue," pleaded Meng Yao, his eyes shining with tears. "Arguing won't change anything, and we haven't seen each other in so long."

It was like somebody threw icy water over them. Sisi seemed to share Shen Jiu's feelings, because she deflated immediately. "You are right. Sit down with your Auntie, A-Yao. Let me get a good look at you."

Shen Jiu watched silently as Sisi asked Meng Yao questions about his new life. He didn't dare interrupt them and provoke a new argument, but their time was limited, so in the end he had to intervene.

"We need to return to the Jiangs, A-Yao."

"I am really happy to see you, Aunt Sisi," said Meng Yao, hugging the woman. Shen Jiu felt something twist inside his chest. In a way Sisi had more claim to Meng Yao than he did.

"I was happy to see you too," said Sisi with a smile. Then she raised her head to look at Shen Jiu, "And Meng Shi… be careful with that lover of yours. You know how dangerous a spurned wife can be. Remember what happened to Xin-mei?"

Shen Jiu had no idea who Xin-mei was. "He is not my lover," he scoffed.

"You have never been stupid. Why start now?"

"I'm not sleeping with him," hissed Shen Jiu. He was getting tired of this conversation.

"Sleep with him or don't sleep with him, it doesn't matter if you act like his mistress already," said Sisi.

"Let's go, Yue Yao," huffed Shen Jiu, and walked out of the room without saying goodbye.

"You shouldn't listen to Aunt Sisi, Mother," said Meng Yao softly when they were outside. "You did the right thing."

"I did a selfish thing. But I don't regret it," said Shen Jiu. Still his mood darkened. For the first time in years he wondered what had happened to Qiu Haitang after the fire.

To maintain the appearance of having been shopping, Shen Jiu went to a market stall and made a quick purchase before joining the Jiangs.

"Here," he said, handing Wei Ying a simple wooden flute. "Instead of a qin."

"Thank you, Shizun," said the child brightly, and tried the instrument immediately, making a high-pitched sound that grated on Shen Jiu's ears.

"Practice in solitude," he ordered briskly.

They didn't stay at the market for long after that. On the rocky path back to the Yao Sect, the children went ahead of them. Jiang Fengmian slowed down so they would trail behind together. "Did your conversation go badly?" he asked.

"She thinks I am your lover," said Shen Jiu plainly.

Jiang Fengmian coughed. "I am sorry."

That made Shen Jiu grit his teeth. "What do you have to be sorry for? It's not your fault that people can't see a man and a woman talking without making assumptions."

"I shouldn't have invited you to this negotiation. Now people believe that to be the confirmation of the rumors, and I have no idea how to dissuade them."

"Well, what did you expect would happen? I told you it was a bad idea."

Shen Jiu cursed the System in his head. At least it didn't lie about the Lore point. The incident with the spirit alone had somehow gained him 300 Lore points. He had demanded to know the criteria of assessment but was rebuffed. He had a suspicion that there was no criteria whatsoever.

"I simply wasn't thinking. Yu Ziyuan… talking to her can be difficult," said Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu stopped in his tracks. "Wait, are you telling me that you invited me to the negotiation to get back at your wife?"

"Not exactly… I mean there were other reasons that made sense at the moment…"

"But you did want to piss off your wife on purpose?"

"I suppose so…" Jiang Fengmian didn't look comfortable with the admission.

"I can't believe you!" said Shen Jiu. All this time he thought the man was a fool, but it was Shen Jiu who was foolish.

"If you use me as a playing piece in your disaster of a marriage again, I am leaving Lotus Pier," said Shen Jiu bitterly.

He walked away quickly, joining the children, so Jiang Fengmian wouldn't be able to apologize. He couldn't believe that doormat of a man had it in him to be spiteful. Yue Qingyuan would never… No matter what Shen Jiu said or did, he had never once been spiteful.

Perhaps they weren't that alike after all.

Chapter 15: The confidant.

"Madam Shen, please," begged Jiang Fengmian, following Shen Jiu like a stray cat, who had been fed once and was now asking for more.

"You and I have nothing to discuss," said Shen Jiu.

"I'm sorry I didn't consider your feelings…" started the man, making Shen Jiu seethe with fury.

"Stop!" he hissed. "Think before you speak! You sound like a character from a love story! What if somebody hears you?"

At that time, most people were preparing for bed so the garden was blissfully empty before Jiang Fengmian intruded on Shen Jiu's personal time. There wasn't a single soul around, Shen Jiu had checked with qi just to be safe. However, one couldn't be too careful in their position. Their situation was already precarious. There was no need to make it worse.

"Sorry," said Jiang Fengmian.

"Stop saying it. I hate this word!"

"You hate the word sorry?" asked Jiang Fengmian as if he was doubting his sanity.

"Yes. I also hate it when people interrupt my evening walks with useless talk," Shen Jiu said pointedly.

"I understand. I'll leave, but before I go, could I ask you for advice?"

"Did you apologise to me so you could beg me for advice?!"

Jiang Fengmian was lucky Shen Jiu didn't have a sword on hand.

"No! But it would be rude to ask without apologising first…"

"Fine. Stop wasting my time and ask already."

It was like talking to a child sometimes. How ridiculous could this man be? Or was it another trick?

Shen Jiu expected a question about the negotiation or even something about Sect Leader Yao's daughter. However, what he got instead was, "How can I get closer to Jiang Cheng?"

"Why are you asking me that?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously.

"Who else am I going to ask? You are a good mother, so you have to know how to do that."

Shen Jiu had no idea how to do that.

"Just teach him something," he said. "And stop bothering me!"

"Thank you for the advice, Madam Shen," said Jiang Fengmian and bowed before leaving.

When they returned to Lotus Pier, Shen Jiu was going to invite Jiang Fengmian to a spar and break his nose. He imagined this scene several times and gradually his anger was extinguished, leaving behind black coal. He felt cold despite the fact that his qi was protecting him from the chill of the night. He considered checking on Meng Yao before going to bed, at least then he wouldn't feel so empty.

What a mess it all was. Shen Jiu stayed out late, listening to the rustle of the wind and trying to keep himself together. It still took him too long to fall asleep when he finally returned to his rooms. Even Jiang Yanli's presence didn't help.

In the morning, he had to join the negotiation once again. He would rather skip it. Jiang Fengmian could deal with his own problems for once. He was clearly not as stupid as Shen Jiu had been led to believe, so he would be fine. What use was this negotiation to Shen Jiu? He would get no benefit from helping.

"The new contract sounds good in theory, but how do we know that the Yao Sect will follow it this time?" asked Jiang Jingheng. Perhaps he wasn't completely incompetent after all. Shen Jiu didn't have the energy to feel surprised by it.

"It is true that my sect had given you no reason to trust us on word alone. That is why I suggest a more solid tie," said Sect Leader Yao. "A tie of marriage would surely have more weight!"

"I am afraid my wife would not approve," said Jiang Fengmian tensely. Shen Jiu was curious to see how he would get out of this on his own.

"Don't tell me you can't control your wife," said Sect Leader Yao dismissively.

Shen Jiu clenched his teeth. If Yu Ziyuan were there to hear that, there would be blood spilled. Shen Jiu considered making it reality despite her absence.

"I'm telling you that I cannot in good conscience offend my wife this way," said Jiang Fengmian.

"Is she that territorial? Considering the new development in your household, I expected you to have more freedom."

Jiang Fengmian clearly didn't know what to say. He brought it upon himself.

"As a person who is involved in the inner workings of the household, I can assure you that Madam Yu would not tolerate a rival. For the sake of your daughter, I would suggest you reconsider," said Shen Jiu plainly.

Sect Leader Yao's face turned sour, but he couldn't argue with that.

"I suggest we make a separate clause for possible breaches. In this case, we can establish what will be considered a breach and what the compensation should be," said Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu listened to them discuss compensation, offering input only when he was asked directly. He had no idea why he had helped Jiang Fengmian. The man deserved to deal with the consequences of his own actions. Perhaps he just couldn't let Sect Leader Yao win.

Soon after, the negotiation was paused, and Shen Jiu was finally allowed to go to the library, where his students were waiting. Later, at the end of the calligraphy lesson, Shen Jiu was surprised when Jiang Fengmian came to fetch his son. Shen Jiu expected the man to mess up somehow and abandon the idea of bonding with his son, but the new behavior persisted until the negotiation finally wrapped up and they returned to Lotus Pier.

Yu Ziyuan came out to meet them personally.

"Husband," she greeted. "You return without a new concubine… Well, I suppose you don't need one."

She looked at Shen Jiu as she said that, making him clench his teeth. He had no desire to become a figure in whatever game these two had.

"Madam Shen was witty enough to help me avoid this offer," said Jiang Fengmian.

Damn it! The worst thing was that Shen Jiu had no idea whether that was on purpose or not.

"Clearly she is talented beyond words," said Yu Ziyuan poisonously. "A-Li, A-Cheng, how do you fare?"

As she finally remembered her children, the confrontation slowly untangled. For the next few days, they settled in their normal routine with Shen Jiu seeing neither Jiang Fengmian nor Yu Ziyuan. The peace was quickly broken, however.

One evening, Shen Jiu took Meng Yao and Wei Ying to the training yard to assess their progress. He didn't trust the Jiang Sect teachers to have the same standards he did. It was impossible not to hear the screaming. As they came to the source of it, there was already a small crowd of gawking disciples.

"Do you not trust me even with this much?!" screamed Yu Ziyuan. She was standing in front of Jiang Fengmian and Jiang Cheng, both of whom had swords at hand.

"I just wanted to teach A-Cheng some forms. I wasn't going to…"

"Because I surely can't teach him right! I am not a Jiang, am I?"

"Of course you can teach him. You have been teaching him well..."

"Then what is your problem?!"

"I just wanted to spend time with my son!" said Jiang Fengmian with sudden assertiveness. Both Jiang Cheng and Yu Ziyuan seemed taken aback by the outburst.

"Since when do you want to spend time with your son?" asked Yu Ziyuan dubiously.

"I have come to the realisation that I wasn't the best father. So I am trying to be better."

"I see. So I have been telling you to treat A-Cheng better for years, and you did nothing, but as soon as you spend time with her…"

Shen Jiu winced. He could feel the disciples glance at him, eager to see his reaction. When did he become a theater character?

"She has nothing to do with it," said Jiang Fengmian firmly.

"She has everything to do with it."

Yu Ziyuan stomped out of the training ground. The next day, she departed on a night hunt. She was away for a week, and after her return she was quick to leave again. Lotus Pier was a calmer place without Yu Ziyuan, but there remained a sense of uncertain doom in the air.

Three months had passed this way, and the fragile balance was in place. Shen Jiu was sitting in front of a table in the Quiet Lotus Pavilion and writing an answer to Sun Peizhi, who warned that "Xiao Ping" could end up beheaded if she wasn't careful. He thought she was being dramatic, but it was nice to see somebody care.

Meng Yao came inside, smelling of food. He must have once again been wasting his time in the kitchens. Shen Jiu had no idea what the boy found so fascinating about it.

Before Shen Jiu could chide him, Meng Yao said, "Yu Ziyuan is back to Lotus Pier."

"Stay out of her way," warned Shen Jiu.

"You should be the one staying out of her way," countered Meng Yao.

"I already do," huffed Shen Jiu. It was humiliating to be chided by a child.

"There are preparations underway to receive high-profile guests," added Meng Yao.

"Another Sect?" asked Shen Jiu.

"The maids say that they were ordered to prepare Madam Jin's usual rooms. I have been told that she is Madam Yu's close friend and, of course, her son is my Shijie's fiancé, so it makes sense for them to visit."

Shen Jiu's fingers clenched involuntarily, crumpling the letter. He distantly thought that he would have to rewrite it. This was Jin Guangshan's wife, Meng Shi's "rival in love", if whatever disgusting thing that man felt towards his paramours could be called love. There was no reason for the woman to know Meng Shi's face, but there still was a risk.

"Keep note of these rumors," said Shen Jiu absently.

"System, is Madam Jin going to recognise this body?" he thought.

[The information is not available for free. You can purchase it for 50 Lore Points. Do you accept?]

"This is robbery! All I need is a Yes or No answer. You gave me information about that bitch Anxin for a single Lore Point and now you demand fifty?!"

[10 Lore Points for a yes or no answer. Do you accept?]

"I'll give you one and no more."

[…1 Lore Point for a yes or no answer. Do you accept?"

The demon couldn't haggle for shit. It was pathetic.

"Yes."

[No, Madam Jin will not be able to recognise your body.]

After that, Shen Jiu decided that he had nothing to worry about. He doubted that he would have to communicate with the woman and her spawn in any way, and even if she were to see him in passing, it wouldn't betray his identity.

That was a mistake on his part.

When the rumors proved to be correct, and Madam Jin came to Lotus Pier with her brat, Shen Jiu was not invited to the welcoming feast. He thought that he would not even have to see the woman, but the next day he received an invitation to have tea with her. For a few moments, he considered declining, but in his position, refusal could have disastrous consequences.

They met in a garden Shen Jiu had not visited before. He knew that it existed, but it was too close to Yu Ziyuan's personal quarters and he felt no need to tempt fate. Its main feature was a pond with fat golden carps, which complemented Madam Jin's yellow and gold attire.

The moment he came close enough to see her face, Shen Jiu faltered. She looked remarkably and unsettlingly similar to Qi Qingqi. It wasn't as jarring as having to look at his own sneering face or at the weak shadow of Yue Qingyuan, but it was enough to put him out of sorts. He went through the greeting ritual without paying it too much mind.

"Please, sit down. You are as gracious as people describe. It is remarkable to see such poise on someone with… humble origins," said Madam Jin faux politely.

So that was how she wanted to play it. Shen Jiu sat down in front of the woman. There was tea ready as well as some sweets. They didn't look appetizing to him.

"This one thanks Madam Jin for the compliment," said Shen Jiu demurely. He was not going to give her the satisfaction of making him angry.

Madam Jin poured him some tea. He wondered whether it could be poisoned. "I have been wondering how you managed to learn enough to become a teacher in one of the great sects. Surely you had to have a truly talented teacher."

"This one had many teachers, but their names are not widely recognised. None of them are among the living now, so this topic is too painful to discuss."

Shen Jiu took a tea cup in hand and probed it with his qi, checking for poison. He didn't feel anything, but this method wasn't foolproof, so he took a very small sip to check. The tea was extremely bitter.

Madam Jin watched him with cold eyes. "That's a pity. Your husband also died, didn't he? It appears that you are truly without connections in this world… But what of your husband's sect? I have heard he was a cultivator."

Was she trying to find holes in his backstory? It was troubling.

"He was a rogue cultivator, so there was no sect to support me and my son after he died. We were lucky to meet generous people on our way."

"I am sure you are truly grateful to Sect Leader Jiang for being so generous in his patronage. Though I have heard that there are certain rumors, making your life more difficult than it has to be."

"This one is too busy to listen to rumors," said Shen Jiu, doing his best to keep his composure.

"Of course, your dedication to your job is truly commendable. Though one could think that someone in your position ought to be paying attention to rumors, lest you provoke some unneeded talk. After all, the rumors can affect the children as well, and who would want that? As a mother, you should understand."

"This one will pay more attention in the future."

"Make sure you do. Oh, and Madam Yue, could you do me a favor? My son is here for a month and I would not want him to stay idle, so it would be wonderful if he could join your class."

Was he supposed to be a spy? Ridiculous. There was nothing to spy on.

"Of course. This one will be honored to teach Young Master Jin."

After finishing a cup of one of the most bitter teas Shen Jiu had the misfortune to taste, he was finally allowed to be on his way. His mood was atrocious, and it didn't help that Wei Ying started to whine as soon as he returned from training.

"She deserves better, Yao-ge!" said the brat. Someday Shen Jiu was going to teach him the importance of inside voice, but he was afraid that if he tried now it would end with violence.

"We are not in a position to have opinions on such things," said Meng Yao. He had a frown on his face.

"What does that even mean? How can I not have an opinion if I have one?"

"It means mind your own damn business, you little brat," grumbled Shen Jiu. He was writing, and if the brat irritated him into breaking the brush, he would break what was left of it on the brat's head.

"But, Shizun, you haven't seen it! Jin Yu is the worst!"

"A-Ying, you should call him Young Master Jin," chided Meng Yao.

Wait, was Jin Zixuan's birth name Jin Yu[1]? Shen Jiu pursed his lips to hide his amusement. It was either a very strange coincidence, or Meng Shi was an extremely bold woman. He wished he got to meet her. He had a feeling she would be interesting to talk to.

"Tell me about him," ordered Shen Jiu. "Is he as obnoxious as his name implies?"

"Mother!" gasped Meng Yao.

"He is going to join my lessons," explained Shen Jiu curtly. "I need to know what I am working with."

"It's even worse! If he is your student, you can't call him… that."

"An obnoxious brat? I call Wei Ying that all the time," huffed Shen Jiu.

"She does," said Wei Ying proudly. "And Jin Yu is obnoxious."

Meng Yao shook his head, defeated.

"What did the brat do?" asked Shen Jiu, addressing Wei Ying, who was clearly the best source of information at the moment.

"I tried to talk to him before the lesson, but he only said 'yes' and 'no'. I thought he was just shy, but then he complained about this and that the whole lesson! He thinks that our disciples lack discipline and that Jin sword forms are more elegant, and he said that Sect Leader Jin is stronger than Uncle Jiang!"

"Don't call him uncle," corrected Shen Jiu.

Wei Ying went on, "And then after the lesson Shijie invited him to go for a walk in the garden together, and he just turned around and left! That's so rude, right, Shizun?"

"He is terrible," agreed Shen Jiu halfheartedly. He wasn't all that invested in the children's drama, but Jin Zixuan didn't sound like a person he would like to have in his classroom.

For his first lesson with the Jin heir present, Shen Jiu chose the most neutral activity: painting. If philosophy, calligraphy, and poetry could be twisted in some kind of way, making

painting into a statement required a particular sort of imagination. Just to be safe, he chose the most neutral subject to paint.

"Who can tell me why the lotus is the symbol of the Yunmeng Jiang Sect?" he asked his audience.

"Because it’s delicious," whispered Wei Ying.

"If the only productive use of your mouth is eating, refrain from making comments," said Shen Jiu. Back in the day, he would make the boy kneel outside for this kind of levity. He was getting soft.

"Lotus is the symbol of immortality, resilience and spiritual enlightenment," said Jiang Yanli.

"That’s true," said Shen Jiu. "The symbolism is certainly taken into account, however, that was definitely not the only reason for the choice."

Usually Meng Yao would submit the expected answer, but Shen Jiu urged the boy not to draw attention before the lesson. He didn’t want to be accused of favoritism.

"Jiang Cheng, do you have any ideas?"

The boy got flustered by sudden attention but composed himself quickly. "Our ancestors used to be merchants, and they were well known for their lotus wine."

"Also true. The symbolic meaning, the history, it all contributed, but there is one component you have all overlooked. I suppose it is easier for a guest to see. Young Master Jin, what comes to your mind when you think about Yunmeng?"

"Um, rivers and lotuses?" said the boy. Shen Jiu took the opportunity to study his face. Meng Yao was clearly the better-looking brother, and he was smarter and more eloquent as well. Shen Jiu felt a strange sense of superiority.

"That is correct. What does that tell us?" he asked.

"Ah, the Yunmeng Jiang sect is the face of the whole region," said Jiang Cheng.

"Now I want all of you to paint a lotus pond. You can use those as references," he said, passing them some quick paintings he had prepared. For the remainder of the lesson, the students were painting silently with Shen Jiu offering minimal corrections.

He would usually be harsher, but the audience made him cautious. In the end, he graded the paintings, being as generous as he could be. He couldn’t have the little Jin go complain to his mother. When the lesson was over, Shen Jiu felt relieved.

To his surprise, Jiang Yanli stayed behind, approaching him nervously.

"Master Shen, could this one ask for guidance?"

"Giving you guidance is my duty as your teacher," said Shen Jiu.

"What should one do if their intended is set on ignoring them?" asked Jiang Yanli, keeping her gaze low.

Why did she think Shen Jiu was a good person to ask that!? Her father's daughter to the bone!

"This teacher thinks that it is more appropriate to ask your mother such questions," he said.

"I know but…" Jiang Yanli's composure broke, showing her nerves. "She is so invested in this engagement that she does not actually listen to me."

"I see. I am afraid I am not a good source of advice here. When I wanted to attract my future husband's attention, I would simply bite him or throw a rock at him," said Shen Jiu.

Jiang Yanli lifted her gaze to give him a bewildered look. Shen Jiu hid his amusement behind the fan. "I was much younger than you are now," he explained.

"Did your future husband get irritated with you?" asked Jiang Yanli.

"I think he was mostly amused," said Shen Jiu wistfully. The memories of Yu Qi acting as an indulgent older brother were both bitter and sweet.

"I don't think Jin Yu would like it if I were mean to him," said Jiang Yanli. "But perhaps if I were more adventurous…"

"You should stop thinking about what he would or would not like. Do you want to spend the rest of your life lying and pretending?"

Shen Jiu had to do that for most of his life and it was exhausting.

"Don't all women do that?"

"Not all of them. Your mother surely does not."

"I don't want to be like my mother," said Jiang Yanli. She immediately looked terrified by her own words. If somebody heard their conversation, Shen Jiu could get in trouble. It would be wise to turn her away, but he had only ever pretended to be wise.

"You cannot be like your mother because you two are not the same person. Nevertheless, your mother is not a bad example to follow. It requires strength not to allow societal expectations to bend you. And I know for a fact that you have some strength inside you, Jiang Yanli."

"Thank you for your guidance, Master Shen," said the girl and bowed before leaving.

Shen Jiu had no idea whether his advice was any good, but he would hate for Jiang Yanli to force herself into uncomfortable molds just to be accepted by a spoiled young master who didn't want to even look her way. She deserved better than that.

[1] Jin Yu written as 金玉 means “gold and jade”, it’s a part of the idiom "jīn yù mǎn táng" (金玉满堂), which translates to "may your hall be full of gold and jade." I chose this as Jin Zixuan’s birth name because he didn’t have one mentioned on canon and he isn’t old enough for courtesy name.

This name compares in an interesting way to Meng Yao (孟瑶). Yao (瑶) means "fine jade" or "precious jade." And while Meng is a surname and shouldn’t be translated, Meng (孟) means “Eldest”, “First”. It was specifically used to denote the eldest son of a concubine or a secondary wife. Meng Shi surely made a statement with this name. return to text ↩

Chapter 16: Birthday.

Jin Yu wanted to go home. He missed his dog, he missed his room, he even missed his teacher. Master Lao could be dull, but at least after lessons with him his mother didn't interrogate him.

"Are you sure she didn't say anything else, dear?" asked his mother. After the lesson she and Madam Yu had sat him down in front of a plate of pastries and started asking questions he didn't know how to answer.

"No," he said, and reached out for a pastry. When he bit down he realised that it was filled with lotus paste. He didn't like it.

"Did it feel to you that the teacher was favoring her own children over you?" asked Madam Yu.

"What children?" he asked. He didn't realize the woman had children.

Madam Yu just stared at him silently, her face scary. Jin Yu looked at his mother, who seemed disappointed.

"Yue Yao and Wei Ying are Madam Yue's children," she explained. Jin Yu could hear the impatience in her voice, but he didn't know what she wanted from him, so he couldn't help it.

Yue Yao was probably the quiet boy from their class. His sword forms weren't bad from what Jin Yu had seen. Come to think of it, he did look like the teacher, although it wasn't as noticeable because they behaved so differently. They were rather like Madam Yu and Jiang Yanli. Like a tiger and house-cat.

"A-Yu," called his mother, her smile tense. "Did you see those two boys getting any special treatment?"

"No," he said.

"We aren't getting anything out of him," said Madam Yu sharply, turning to his mother.

"She is not stupid, but she cannot stay on guard the whole month. A low-born like her cannot be a suitable teacher. She can pretend all she wants, but the truth will come out."

If they started talking over him, it meant that Jin Yu was free from the conversation at last. He took another pastry. This one was filled with jujube paste. It was much better.

"Don't underestimate her. I told you this wouldn't work," said Madam Yu.

"Well, when we tried to find dirt on her, it led to nothing. We can't even conclude whether she is from Yunmeng as she has no accent. What else is there to do? I suppose if someone catches them in a compromising position…"

"My husband has not shamed me this way yet. And I do not think he is planning to," said Madam Yu.

Jin Yu tensed. If adults started speaking about compromising positions and shaming, it usually led to screaming.

"How can you know? With everything that you have told me…"

"There are servants and disciples that report to me. I would know."

"Mother, may I be excused?" asked Jin Yu. He was full and he didn't like the topic.

"Of course, A-Yu," said his mother, not paying attention to him. She rarely did. He thought about where he could go. Jiang Cheng said that he had dogs. It would be nice to play with one.

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"This is the space where they can run around as much as they want. Dogs like running," explained Jiang Cheng.

Wei Ying looked at the bamboo fence as if he were trying to determine how sturdy it was. "They can't get out of there on their own, right?"

"Yes, when Father first gave me Princess, she used to run everywhere. But Mother said she was being a nuisance, so we had this enclosure built," said Jiang Cheng.

"Aren't Princess, Jasmine, and Love the same age?" asked Yue Yao seriously.

"A-Cheng was so happy when Father gave him Princess that father gifted him a new puppy the next month, and another one a month after that," explained Yanli.

"He would have gotten a fourth one, but Mother was against it," said Jiang Cheng bitterly. Mother always complained that Father was neglecting him, but when Father actually did something, she also got mad. Jiang Cheng couldn't understand her.

"Four dogs do sound a bit excessive," said Yue Yao. "Young Master Jiang, which one of your dogs is the calmest?"

"Probably Princess," said Jiang Cheng, feeling warmth at the tip of his ears. He wasn't used to other disciples calling him Young Master, everybody just called him Jiang Cheng.

He knew that Yue Yao called his sister Shijie, but it would feel weird to ask him to call Jiang Cheng Shixiong. Yue Yao did join the sect later, but he was older and behaved like an adult already.

"Can I just look at them through the fence?" asked Wei Ying.

"Mother wants you to pet a dog. You do not want to disappoint her, do you?" asked Yue Yao calmly. "Don't worry. We are going to be with you all the time, and if you get scared Young

Master Jiang will take Princess away."

"Just call me Jiang Cheng," he said and felt his face get warm. He should have said that earlier. Now it just sounded strange. "There is no need to be that polite."

"Of course, I'll call you whatever you like," said Yue Yao with a polite smile. He was a lot like Yanli, but his smile hardly ever reached his eyes. Jiang Cheng didn't like that.

"I'll bring Princess now," he said to change the topic.

His girls ran to him as soon as he came into the enclosure. Jiang Cheng didn't have the heart to leave before he gave all three their fair share of belly rubs. He wasn't spending as much time with them as he should have lately.

Jiang Cheng used to let his dogs out of the enclosure and run around Lotus Pier with them. He stopped doing that once Wei Ying had joined the sect. Of course, it wasn't his friend's fault that he was afraid, but Jiang Cheng very much hoped that their exercise would work.

When Jiang Cheng and Princess came out of the enclosure, Yue Yao was holding Wei Ying by the arm so he wouldn't run away. His dog wanted to greet new people, but Jiang Cheng said, "Princess, stop! Sit!"

She sat down next to his feet, though her floppy ears hung sadly. Princess was a good girl.

"She listens to you?" asked Wei Ying, who was now clinging to his brother. It was strange how he would react to even a small dog like Princess as if it were some fearsome monster.

"Of course, I taught all my dogs basic commands, but Princess is the oldest, so she listens better than her sisters." Though the dogs weren't actually related, Jiang Cheng liked calling them sisters. He wanted them to have a family.

"Come on, A-Ying. Let's come closer," said Yue Yao gently. The two of them approached very slowly, and Princess was wagging her tail so much that it kept making a thumping sound.

"See, she is happy to see you," said Yanli.

The two boys came close enough to touch, and Yue Yao stroked Princess's head gently, making sure not to touch her ears.

"Now you try it," he said.

"But what if she bites me?" asked Wei Ying.

"She won't," said Jiang Yanli. "I think A-Cheng is more likely to bite you."

"Hey!" said Jiang Cheng. He bit her only once when he was two, but Yanli was determined to keep reminding him about it. He didn't even remember biting her.

Wei Ying laughed at the story, forgetting his fear for a moment. "Alright. I'll try."

He moved his hand closer and closer as if he was about to touch fire. Then, after what seemed like forever he put his hand on top of Princess' head.

"She is soft," said Wei Ying with a strange mix of wonder and fear.

"Give her a good pat," said Jiang Cheng.

Wei Ying started slowly, but as he wasn't bitten, he quickly became bolder. He even scratched her behind the ear. Princess, unable to take such behavior calmly, licked his hand. Jiang Cheng was ready to take her away, but Wei Ying just laughed.

"It tickles," he said.

"Do you want to play with her?" asked Jiang Cheng hopefully. "If you throw her a ball, she will bring it back."

"Really? Let's do that!" said Wei Ying. He still was a bit wary of Princess when she sniffed at his feet, but he didn't run away. He also got really excited playing with her. After seeing that Wei Ying felt comfortable enough to play with a dog, Yanli opened the box she had brought with her.

"I made some buns yesterday, so we could celebrate," she said shyly.

"Shijie, you're the best!" said Wei Ying brightly, and grabbed a bun. Jiang Cheng smiled. Now his sister had more people who appreciated her. He had no idea why other disciples didn't line up to befriend Yanli.

Their peace and quiet was interrupted by the arrival of Jin Yu. Jiang Cheng recalled inviting the Jin heir to see his dogs during the welcoming feast. However, the other boy didn't say anything at the invitation, so Jiang Cheng didn't expect him to come now.

"Do you only have regular dogs here?" asked Jin Yu, looking at Princess with mild disappointment. "Can't your family afford spiritual dogs? They are much smarter."

Jiang Cheng clenched his fists. Before he could say anything in defense of his dogs, Wei Ying got involved. "Princess is much smarter than any of your dogs! And much cuter I'm sure!"

Jiang Cheng felt warmth in his chest at the defense.

"Would you like a lotus paste bun, Young Master Jin?" asked Yanli, trying to defuse the situation. "I made them myself."

"I have eaten already. And I can't stand lotus paste."

Jiang Cheng could see his sister's face fall. He wanted to fight Jin Yu for this offence. Saying that he didn't like lotus was just like saying that he didn't like Jiang Yanli. But if Jiang Cheng picked a fight with Jin Yu, his mother would surely kill him, so he stopped himself.

"I just remembered a good proverb," said Wei Ying. "Gold and jade on the outside, rot and decay on the inside[1]."

Jiang Cheng couldn't believe his audacity. Neither could Jin Yu, who started opening and closing his mouth like a fish. It was kind of funny.

"You… you… how dare you say something like that to me!?"

Yue Yao was quick to interfere, his polite smile almost scary. "Young Master Jin, please, don't take offence. We have just been reciting proverbs before you arrived. Your comment about the buns must have prompted A-Ying's memory."

"Whatever. I'm not going to waste more time with you lot," huffed Jin Yu before leaving. Jiang Cheng was happy to see him gone. He had no idea why his mother thought that this spoiled boy could make a good husband for his sister. Jiang Yanli definitely deserved better than this.

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Meng Yao dropped the polite smile as soon as they entered the Quiet Lotus Pavilion.

"Now tell me what made you think that offending Young Master Jin was a good idea," he said sharply.

Wei Ying didn't seem to take him seriously, as he simply shrugged, "He was so rude to Jiang Cheng and Jiang Yanli! I had to do something."

Meng Yao took a deep breath, so that his next words came out calmer than he felt. "We are not in a position to make enemies like him. If his mother finds out, she can make our lives more difficult, and even if she doesn't, one day he is going to be a Sect Leader."

It was simple common sense to Meng Yao, but for someone like Wei Ying, it needed to be spelled out. It was far from the first time Meng Yao had to educate him, but usually the situation was less serious.

"I won't be nice to Jin Yu just because he is going to be a Sect Leader," said Wei Ying.

"You don't need to be nice. Just don't offend him on purpose!" Meng Yao didn't want to shout at his little brother, but sometimes he was so stubborn that it was hard not to.

"What happened this time?" asked Mother. She went out of her room, clearly drawn out by their arguing.

Wei Ying regaled her the story of his play date with Princess, making it sound more dramatic when it was. When he reached the part with the proverb, Mother actually laughed.

Meng Yao glared at her. She was supposed to be an adult here. Why was he the one teaching Wei Ying basic social survival? And she didn't have the decency to hide her amusement.

"Don't encourage him," said Meng Yao.

"It’s the boy’s parents’ fault. They shouldn’t have given him such a stupid name," said Mother.

"See, Yao-ge, Shizun approves," said Wei Ying happily.

"The two of you are going to get us thrown out of Lotus Pier," said Meng Yao. He actually liked it here, so he would rather stay. In Auntie Sun’s house they were just guests living off her generosity, and everybody knew that. Here they were disciples, and despite all the rumors they were treated with respect. Meng Yao didn’t want to lose that. He also didn’t want to lose Jiang Yanli’s friendship. He never had a friend before.

"Jiang Fengmian won’t kick us out. I could call him a good-for-nothing piece of shit to his face, and he would do nothing to punish me. He definitely wouldn’t punish us for some petty childish insults," said Mother with strange confidence.

Meng Yao narrowed his eyes. "Why is he so lenient with you in the first place? It’s not normal. You talk to him like he is your subordinate and he accepts it."

"How am I supposed to know?" huffed Mother defensively. There was something unnatural about her reaction. Meng Yao had a feeling she was hiding something, but he wasn’t able to keep prodding because she left for her own room.

"Now let’s have a talk about what’s appropriate to say to a boy of a higher status," said Meng Yao with his most biting smile. Wei Ying groaned, but complied.

For the next two weeks Wei Ying did not pick fights with Jin Yu, who avoided all of them like plague. It appeared that Meng Yao’s brother could hold his tongue when he was given a good incentive to do so. And avoiding another lecture about appropriate behavior seemed to be good enough motivation.

In Meng Yao’s opinion, Jin Yu was simply a lonely child who was so spoiled and prideful that he didn’t know how to speak to others without offending them. Meng Yao could probably integrate the boy into their group, but after that idiot made Jiang Yanli upset he wasn’t inclined to help him.

He didn’t have time to think about Jin Yu too much anyway, because Wei Ying’s birthday was approaching and this year Meng Yao wanted to celebrate it properly. However, he had no idea how the gentry actually celebrated their birthdays, so he needed advice.

"You wanted to talk about something, Shidi?" asked Jiang Yanli. Though Meng Yao always came to meetings a bit in advance, Jiang Yanli was already waiting for him in the garden when he arrived. He noted this habit of hers. It was the first time he actually asked her to meet him somewhere without their brothers to act as chaperones. Mixed gender friendships were always complicated and there was also the difference in status to account for.

"I have a question, but it’s a bit embarrassing," said Meng Yao. It really was embarrassing to him. He didn’t like to remind people of his lower origin. "Do disciples in your sect usually celebrate birthdays?"

"Of course. I have never been invited to one, but there is usually a small celebration. Why are you asking?"

"You see, Wei Ying's birthday is coming soon, and I want to celebrate it properly this time. But we usually don't celebrate, so I don't know how to go about it in the right way."

Jiang Yanli looked heartbroken. It was the main reason he could confide things like that to her. She most likely wouldn't understand, but she always was sympathetic.

"You don't celebrate birthdays?"

"Only the gentry celebrate birthdays. Mother used to buy me something useful like new shoes. Now she just gives us something sweet to share. I'm not sure she knows how to celebrate properly herself…"

Mother was not hiding her status as an orphan from a lower class family, so he felt safe telling Jiang Yanli about it.

"I can help you organize the celebration. It's not difficult. We will just need to make longevity noodles and some other sweets and snacks. And bring presents, of course!"

They discussed the details of the celebration and proper gifts for some time after that. Then Jiang Yanli asked, "And when is your birthday, Yue-shidi?"

"On the twentieth day of the second month[2]."

Her eyes widened. "What a coincidence! It appears that you and my fiancé were born on the same day."

It was a rather strange coincidence, but it was just a birthdate. It hardly could have a special meaning.

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"Perhaps we could feed the fish," offered Yue Yao unexpectedly after they were done with their afternoon training.

"Great idea! Jiang Cheng, do you want to feed the carp with us!" hollered Wei Ying so his friend could hear him on the other side of the training field.

He could see Jin Yu give him an annoyed look. Wei Ying couldn't wait for that pampered peacock to finally leave Lotus Pier.

Jiang Cheng walked closer to them. "I'm busy today," he said.

Wei Ying frowned. "Doing what?"

"None of your business!" huffed Jiang Cheng, and left.

"What's with him today?" asked Wei Ying.

Yue Yao shrugged. "Perhaps he is just in a bad mood. Let’s go."

Yue Yao had the rice with him already, so they didn’t need to go to the kitchen. He was thoughtful like that, always planning ahead. Sometimes Wei Ying worried that his brother thought too much.

The fish seemed happy to eat the rice, and Wei Ying looked at the process with fascination. They were almost out of rice when he noticed that he was the only one doing the feeding.

"Don’t you want to feed the fish yourself, Yao-ge? Watching is only half the fun."

"Honestly, it still feels strange to me to give away the food this easily. I still remember going to bed hungry," said Yue Yao quietly.

"But you bought me soup when we met," said Wei Ying. It was one of his brightest memories. He still couldn’t believe his luck some days.

"It was different. Animals should be able to feed themselves, but you were just a child and nobody wanted to help you. That wretched woman even wanted to hit you when you did nothing to deserve it. I think for a moment you reminded me of myself," said Yue Yao. His face was grim. It was rare to see him with the corners of his lips lowered.

Wei Ying dropped the rest of the rice in the pond and went to hug his brother. Yue Yao laughed. "Aren’t you too old for this?"

"A-Ying is three."

Yue Yao laughed harder. "Ah, stop that. Mother is waiting for us."

"Shizun is just going to complain that we are noisy," said Wei Ying.

"Not today, I hope," said Yue Yao cryptically. Wei Ying didn’t understand his words until they returned home.

Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng were waiting for them in the courtyard of Quiet Lotus Pavilion. There were two tables behind them, one of them full of food.

"What’s happening?" asked Wei Ying, baffled by the change. He couldn’t believe Shizun let them bring furniture to her courtyard. She once shouted at Wei Ying for bringing a good rock he found, saying that he ruined the Feng Shui.

"Happy birthday!" said three voices at the same time.

Wei Ying forgot about that. He usually found out it was his birthday when Yue Yao gave him candy.

"Why would you do all that? It’s not like I am sixty[3]!" said Wei Ying.

"It’s the day you were born, stupid, so sit down and eat your longevity noodles[4]."

"Or you could see your presents," said Yue Yao eagerly. He probably wanted to see Wei Ying's reaction to his present. Yue Yao really was generous and liked spoiling people, especially his little brother. Wei Ying couldn't complain.

"Yes, I want to see my presents!"

"But mother always makes me eat the noodles first," complained Jiang Cheng.

"Don't be harsh, A-Cheng. Mother isn't here to complain," said Jiang Yanli.

Wei Ying went to the table with toys to see his presents. The first thing he saw was a small bow and arrows. He picked it up to try aiming.

"This is from my father," explained Jiang Cheng. "He would come to give it to you himself, but it wouldn't be proper."

"Thank him for me then," said Wei Ying, and brushed his hand over the large kite painted in the shape of the dragon.

"A-Jie and I made it together," explained Jiang Cheng proudly.

"It's amazing. Thank you!" said Wei Ying.

The last thing he took from the table was a wooden cube. Wei Ying examined it under Yue Yao's eager gaze.

"This is a puzzle," explained Yue Yao excitedly. "You have to put it apart and then reassemble it."

Wei Ying looked the cube over with more interest. He hadn't realized that it was made of several separate pieces. He wondered why it didn't fall apart then.

"Thank you Yao-ge! This seems fun."

Before they could go to the table and eat, Shizun went out of the house, looking put upon. As she approached she threw something at Wei Ying and it bounced off his forehead.

"You were supposed to catch that," huffed Shizun.

Wei Ying lifted the object off the ground. It was jianzi[5]. Unlike the ones Wei Ying saw on the streets it was made of soft black feathers with a shiny coin attached.

"Thank you, Shizun! I've always wanted one!" He used to watch other children play sometimes when he was wandering the streets. It always seemed fun.

"Thank me by keeping this celebration down. I'm going to read," said Shizun, turning to leave.

"But aren't you going to watch me eat longevity noodles? Jiang Cheng says it's important!"

Shizun faltered. "Well, if it’s important, then be quick about it."

Wei Ying didn’t want to make Shizun more annoyed when she already was, so he took a bowl with noodles.

"So am I supposed to just eat them?" he asked.

"You have to eat the entire noodle in one go," explained Jiang Yanli. "You can’t cut it or bite it. It symbolizes the long life ahead of you."

That actually sounded like fun! He slurped the noodle until his cheeks were full and only when the whole thing was in his mouth did he start to chew. If one had to eat those noodles to have a long life, Wei Ying would have to make sure that Yue Yao had them for his birthday as well, and Shizun too.

"Shizun, when is your birthday? I’ll need to know when to prepare a present!" said Wei Ying once he finished his noodles.

It seemed to surprise her. "As if I need presents from you."

"But, Mother, isn’t it proper for us to celebrate?" asked Yue Yao gently. He always knew how to talk to Shizun and not make her mad.

"Well, it might be proper, but I am an orphan, so I do not know the exact date. Supposedly it was sometime in autumn."

Wei Ying’s birthday was also in autumn.

"We can share my birthday if you want! Though we don’t have presents prepared, we have enough food for two celebrations," said Wei Ying.

Shizun’s eyes widened. "You’d give away the shirt off your back in the middle of winter, wouldn’t you? Enjoy your celebration."

She left after that but there was no anger on her face. Wei Ying was pretty sure that Shizun was pleased by his offer.

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When Jiang Yanli knocked on her mother’s door, Jinzhu was the one to open it.

"My mistress is waiting for you in the dressing room," said the maid.

It had been a while since Yanli was allowed in her mother’s space. Mother was a private person, so only her trusted maids were allowed to come and go inside without invitation. Last time Jiang Yanli was invited they had a serious conversation about her cultivation path. Whatever her mother wanted to speak of now, Jiang Yanli dreaded it.

The dressing room hadn’t changed much since Jiang Yanli was little. Even the smell of incense was familiar. Sandalwood was her mother’s favorite. The only thing that changed

was the folding screen. The one Jiang Yanli remembered had a maple tree on it, but the new one depicted a mountain range, reminiscent of Meishan[6].

"Kneel before me. I need to redo your hair. It's too simple for your station," said Mother, after giving Jiang Yanli an assessing look.

Jiang Yanli touched her hair self-consciously. She hadn't spent much time on it that morning because, before her mother summoned her, she had been planning to spend her time at the kitchen.

"Is there any special occasion?" asked Jiang Yanli as her mother began to undo her hair from two simple buns.

"We are going to have tea with Yu Heling and Jin Yu," said Mother. Jiang Yanli tensed.

Mother didn't seem to notice, and even if she did, she didn't comment. She began to brush Jiang Yanli's hair and she tried to find peace in the gesture. Instead she imagined having to spend time with her intended and winced.

"Mother, what was the first time you met father like?"

For a moment Mother's hand froze, but then she continued brushing. "It was during a Discussion Meeting. Here at Lotus Pier."

"Were you engaged already?" The only thing Jiang Yanli knew about her parents' relationship was that they had an arranged marriage and that they didn't seem to like each other very much.

"No," Mother said curtly. She spread some oil over Jiang Yanli's hair. It smelled stronger than her preferred one.

"Did you like him when you met?" asked Jiang Yanli desperately.

"There was a competition. Everybody was showing off their fighting skills, but the duels were separated by gender. I defeated all the other female cultivators, and asked to be able to compete with men. Your grandfather made fun of me. Said women couldn't be real cultivators. But after the discussion was over your father, who had won the competition among men, invited me for a spar… Yes, I liked him."

For the first time in her life Jiang Yanli heard her mother's voice get almost warm as she spoke about Jiang Fengmian.

"I don't think I like Jin Yu," said Jiang Yanli honestly. He was younger than her and it was difficult not to see him as a child. And he was a very awkward child as well. If he was courteous and well-spoken like Yue Yao it would be easier to imagine marrying him one day.

"It's better this way. Less heartbreak," said Mother. Jiang Yanli felt something inside her chest ache.

"But wouldn't it be better to marry someone you like?"

Mother took her hands off Jiang Yanli's hair, having finished braiding it. Then she put her hands on Jiang Yanli's shoulders and sighed, "I really liked your father and I was happy when he finally agreed to marry me. But when I came to Lotus Pier, I wasn't accepted as his wife. Your grandmother couldn't stand me. She thought I was too man-like and the servants followed her. Your father couldn't do much against his mother. I don't want you to go through something like this, and Yu Heling is the only woman I trust to treat you well once you marry in."

Jiang Yanli's heart clenched, "I understand."

She remembered her former teacher, her grandmother's sister. She used to say that if Jiang Yanli wanted to have a happy marriage, she should look at her mother and do the opposite. The worst thing of all was that Jiang Yanli believed her. Was her grandmother the same way?

"Good. Now let's go. They must be already waiting for us."

Jiang Yanli spent the rest of the evening nibbling on pastries and listening to her mother and Madam Jin talk. From time to time they would address either Jiang Yanli or Jin Yu, who seemed to want to be anywhere but here.

"A-Yu, A-Li, why don't you take a walk in the garden? We are leaving tomorrow and you hardly spent any time together," said Madam Jin.

Neither of them dared complain. The garden was full of insects at that time of day and Jiang Yanli wished to retire.

"How do you like Lotus Pier, Young Master Jin?" she asked politely.

"It's… fine."

"It must be really different from what you are used to."

Jin Yu grunted in agreement. Jiang Yanli looked at his disinterested face and felt tired.

"I have been thinking about our engagement lately," said Jiang Yanli. "I think that we should speak seriously about it once we become old enough to marry. If either one of us doesn't want to marry, we should ask our fathers to dissolve the engagement."

Jiang Yanli's father was not always the most attentive, but she knew that if she asked him he would do it. He cared about her happiness just like mother did.

Jin Yu suddenly glared at her. "Do you like somebody else? You're always together with Wei Ying's brother. Is it him?"

"What are you talking about?" asked Jiang Yanli, baffled.

"What makes him a better choice than me? I'm going to be a Sect Leader and he is just a child of some low-born teacher who probably wasn't even married to his father," said Jin Yu quickly.

"Don’t speak about my teacher like this. Yue Yao is my best friend. I might not like him this way, but I would rather marry him than you! He is kind, hardworking, thoughtful of other people feelings, and more importantly he bothers to actually talk to me."

Jin Yu huffed and turned away, leaving in haste. Not eager to explain to her mother what happened, she went to her room, expecting to be summoned for a stern talk soon. Jin Yu had to complain to his mother. However, nothing happened.

In the morning Jiang Yanli went to see her fiancé and his mother off. To her surprise Jin Yu approached her, looking put upon. "If I write to you, will you answer?" he asked gruffly.

"Of course," said Jiang Yanli before she could fully understand what was happening.

"Good," said Jin Yu curtly and left for the carriage without saying goodbye.

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[1] A Chinese proverb. The first part sounds exactly like Jin Yu’s name: Jīn yù qí wài, bài xù qí zhōng. return to text ↩

[2] I have taken Jin Guangyao’s birthday from the wiki. Just like everything connected to measuring time and distance, it is severely westernised because I don’t want to confuse myself and readers. Fun fact: they actually measured birthdays by lunar months in Ancient China.return to text ↩

[3] The 60th birthday marks the completion of a full five 12-year zodiac cycle and was considered a major rebirth, warranting a large, lavish celebration.return to text ↩

[4] My portrayal likely differs much from the actual traditional celebration, but longevity noodles are an authentic detail. It is a traditional Chinese birthday dish consisting of a single, long noodle. The eater must consume it in one continuous slurp without biting or breaking it, as the unbroken noodle symbolizes a wish for a long and unbroken life. return to text ↩

[5] A traditional Chinese shuttlecock kicked in a popular street game. For Wei Ying, who was once a homeless orphan, the gift of a jianzi represents the carefree childhood game he could only watch from the sidelines. Shen Jiu definitely can relate.return to text ↩

[6] The character 楓 (Fēng) in Jiang Fengmian's name means "maple tree." return to text ↩

I was very eager to get this out in time for Wei Ying’s birthday for the fun of it, so it possible I’ve been not as attentive when editing as usual. Feel free to tell me if anything is off.

Chapter 17: The Trial.

"You are improving," said Jiang Fengmian, lowering his sword. Shen Jiu was lying on the ground in a graceless heap, so he did not feel much improved. He supposed it was too daring to expect to defeat a Sect Leader after a single year of training with a sword.

Jiang Fengmian offered him a hand.

"Don't patronize me," said Shen Jiu, grasping Jiang Fengmian's hand and allowing himself to be assisted. "My speed is atrocious, to say nothing of my stamina." He let go of the man's hand as soon as he was on his feet. It was somewhat hard to stand still, so he definitely overdid it with training.

"The birth takes a toll on the woman's body. It took my wife two years to return to her full capacity after A-Cheng's birth, and she started training almost immediately."

"I'm surprised you noticed."

Jiang Fengmian frowned. "We used to spar regularly. She was… she is a very challenging sparring partner." There was something in his eyes that suggested that for a moment he was back in the past. Then his eyes turned sad.

"Did you stop because of me?" asked Shen Jiu, examining a new hole in his sleeve. After a year of regular sparring sessions, Jiang Fengmian finally agreed to use his actual sword. Shen Jiu was pleased by this, but he did not appreciate having to mend the holes all the time.

"Ah, no, we stopped years before that. It just happened one day," said Jiang Fengmian. He seemed to be looking at a particular spot on the training ground as he said this.

"I don't have energy for another bout, so I'm going to bed," said Shen Jiu. For the last stretch of their sparring session, he held on only by imagining Liu Qingge's judgmental face.

"Wait," Jiang Fengmian said. "Before you go, I wanted to thank you for your advice. Yu Bo is doing very well as the head disciple."

Shen Jiu scoffed. Jiang Jingheng was not only incompetent but had been proven to relay all information directly to Yu Ziyuan. It took months to find a new head disciple because no matter who Jiang Fengmian chose, either the elders or Yu Ziyuan would be displeased with his decision.

This issue was a no brainer for Shen Jiu, who suggested choosing by merit and reminding all the displeased who was the Sect Leader here. Yu Bo was young and was related to the Yu clan, which made the elders doubt his candidacy. However, he was loyal, disciplined, and had a good head on his shoulders, as opposed to the previous head disciple.

"I cannot officially pay you for your counsel, but I still wanted to thank you in some way," said Jiang Fengmian. He held out a small package.

"What is this?"

"Cultivation pills. I know you want to form a golden core as soon as possible. These will help."

It was a good choice. If it were silks or jewellery, Shen Jiu would throw them at Jiang Fengmian's face. He was not a spoiled mistress to receive such gifts. However, cultivation pills were both very useful and very expensive.

He took the package and Jiang Fengmian smiled at him brightly. Idiot.

Shen Jiu left the training grounds without saying goodbye. It had been a long time since he had bothered with politeness when it came to Jiang Fengmian.

The next morning, they had just finished their calligraphy lesson and moved on to music practice when a disciple entered the classroom and bowed low, his arrival accompanied by a high-pitched screech from Wei Ying's flute.

"This one apologizes for the interruption," said the disciple, looking at the floorboards. "Madam Yu demands your immediate presence in the reception hall."

"What for?" asked Shen Jiu stiffly. Whatever game Yu Ziyuan wanted to play could have waited until the end of their lessons.

"Madam Yu didn't say. But she wanted all of you to come. She was quite insistent about it."

Shen Jiu scoffed. He wanted to drag his feet, but his precarious position didn't allow him such freedom. Of course, he could do what he wanted and expect Jiang Fengmian to deal with his wife for him, but even he wasn't that cruel.

"Alright, let's see what Madam Yu wants," Shen Jiu said, standing up.

The disciple led them to the reception hall as if Shen Jiu didn't know where it was. After spending more than a year at Lotus Pier, he knew his way around it well and did not require a guide.

Shen Jiu's mind went through all the possible reasons Yu Ziyuan could summon them, but could not think of one. She had found out about Jiang Cheng's abduction from Jiang Jingheng months ago, but Jiang Fengmian had already dealt with the fallout from that. He couldn't think of any other reason she would invite the children as well.

The reception room was engulfed in the sound of curious chatter. It was clear that none of the numerous people in the room knew why they were invited. Shen Jiu glanced at the central dais with Jiang Fengmian's chair on it. It was empty.

"All the clan's elders are here," whispered Meng Yao. Shen Jiu had no idea why the boy knew their faces. He was eleven years old. There was no need for him to get involved in politics.

The only people whom Shen Jiu recognised were Yu Ziyuan, Jiang Jingheng and…

"What is she doing here?" he grumbled under his breath.

She looked washed out and appeared somewhat beaten by life, her face prematurely marked by age and her hair hanging limply, but he still recognised Anxin. She had the same haughty expression.

Now Shen Jiu could guess what this meeting was about and it was the worst possible thing to happen.

He looked back at Meng Yao and Wei Ying and considered grabbing them and running away. It would be worth trying, if they had their own swords, but on foot they wouldn't get far. He wondered whether Jiang Fengmian would take care of the boys if Shen Jiu were condemned.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Jiang Fengmian burst into the room, followed by his new head disciple.

"What's the meaning of this?" he asked, his voice loud enough to be heard over the crowd.

"You are just in time," said Yu Ziyuan unsettlingly-mirthful. "Please take your seat."

"Shouldn't you be the one taking it? It seems that you have something to say," said Jiang Fengmian, his words bitter.

"If my husband permits," said Yu Ziyuan mockingly, and walked up the dais. Jiang Fengmian whispered something to Yu Bo. The young man left in a hurry. Shen Jiu noticed Yu Ziyuan's maids activate privacy talismans over the door. He had no time to think about the significance of this because Yu Ziyuan started talking.

"I wanted to address a rot that had infiltrated our ranks. A certain person, who lied about their name, their past and their qualifications and got employed under these false pretences. But before I begin, I will give them a chance to confess."

She met his eyes as she said that and Shen Jiu glared at her. If she found out, there was no need to make a spectacle out of it. She should have simply spoken to him in private. He would have left if she promised to keep his past a secret. It was clear that she didn't just want him gone. No, Yu Ziyuan wanted to murder him socially and she would likely succeed.

"As expected," said Yu Ziyuan. "Then we can proceed. I call the first witness: Jiang Jingheng, step forward."

The former head disciple went up to the dais and knelt in front of Yu Ziyuan. A loyal mutt at his mistress's feet. It was a disgusting sight.

"You may recount the incident that made you doubt Madam Yue's character."

"A year ago, on our way to the Yao Sect, we investigated the disappearance of a child. When we retired to bed that day, Young Master Jiang himself was abducted, making his father so fearful that his judgment was surely clouded. That was when Madam Yue chose to show her true colors."

What nonsense was he even speaking about?

"She dragged us to a flower house, saying that we could find new information here. I need to clarify that by us I mean not only myself and the Sect Leader, but her own children, and, most appallingly, Young Mistress Jiang. I expressed my concern immediately but the woman didn't seem to find anything reprehensible in that place."

There were scandalized gasps all over the room. Hypocrites. He was certain that most of those so-called righteous elders had paid for the "flowers" in question at least once in their lifetime.

"Once inside, Madam Yue took command as if we were guests in her own home. She knew whom to address, what questions to ask, and even the precise price for the workers' effort. All throughout our visit, I watched for the slightest sign of shame expected of any well-raised lady. There was none to be found."

"Do you have anything to say in your defence, Madam Yue?" asked Yu Ziyuan.

"Why would this one need to defend herself? The visit was necessary and the Sect Leader gave his permission," said Shen Jiu dryly.

"Without Madam Shen's unorthodox approach, my son would be dead. I have no doubt of that," said Jiang Fengmian firmly. "Not only did she find new evidence, she deduced the reason for disappearances and suggested a way to lure the spirit that led to its defeat. I will not entertain any critique of the methods that kept my child alive."

Shen Jiu heard the whispers. People were turning their heads to look at him and he felt his skin crawl under their gazes. What right did they have to judge him?

"Jiang Jingheng, continue," said Madam Yu.

"As many of you know, half a year ago I was demoted from the post of the head disciple," said Jiang Jingheng. "Which I suspected was the result of Madam Yue's influence…"

"You were demoted for breaking my direct orders," said Jiang Fengmian sharply.

"Your orders to keep certain things away from me," said Yu Ziyuan bitterly.

"What use do I have of a head disciple who answers to another person? You might be my wife, but he is under my command," said Jiang Fengmian. There was something in his voice. Shen Jiu glanced at his face and was surprised to realise that Jiang Fengmian was angry.

"Let the boy get to his point," said one of the elders. "I will discipline him after we are done here."

"This is Jiang Jingheng's father. He was the one who pushed for his appointment as the head disciple. He is also Sect Leader Jiang's second cousin once removed," whispered Meng Yao. Shen Jiu had to use his cultivation to hear it.

"How do you know these things?" he whispered back.

"How do you not know these things?"

"After my demotion I had free time to investigate my suspicions. And only recently, after months of fruitless search, I finally found a woman who recognised Madam Yue's portrait. However, she knew her by another name."

"Our next witness can confirm Madam Yue's real identity. Wang Anxin, step forward," ordered Yu Ziyuan. As Jiang Jingheng stood up and returned to the crowd, Anxin knelt down in his place.

"State your name, your occupation, and your relation to the accused," said Yu Ziyuan.

"My name is Wang Anxin of Three-Well Lane Flower House in Yinping. But four years ago I worked at the famous Hundred Flowers Tower, renowned through all Yunmeng! This woman you call Madam Yue is actually called Meng Shi. She was one of the flowers, a washed-out one, but still one of us."

"Are you certain that this is the same person?" asked Yu Ziyuan.

"Of course, your grace! I would recognise her anywhere, especially with her bastard son standing next to her. She claimed his father was a cultivator if you can believe it!"

The whispers exploded around them, the word bastard repeated many times. Shen Jiu put his hand on Meng Yao's shoulder and squeezed. The boy was as stiff as a board. At least the bitch didn't mention Jin Guangshan by name.

"Imagine how appalled I felt when I found out the truth," said Yu Ziyuan. "For a year both of my children were taught by a prostitute with no formal education. Think what other sects would think of us if this information got out! We would become a laughing stock. Who knows what rotten things she taught them?"

"Why don't we ask the children? They were the ones being taught," said Jiang Fengmian.

"Madam Shen never taught us anything inappropriate," said Jiang Yanli politely. "Her origin does not make her teachings any less worthy."

Jiang Cheng opened his mouth and closed it, looking at his mother, who was glaring at Jiang Yanli. The girl didn't cower when faced with her mother's fury, keeping her eyes low and her face respectful. Shen Jiu felt a pang of strange pride.

"My lady, didn't you come to observe the lessons yourself? I'm sure you would have told me if you found anything amiss," said Jiang Fengmian.

"She still came to our house under a false name. Somebody like her would never be employed, if the truth was known! And she knows that or she would have said something in her defense!" said Yu Ziyuan. There was a certain expression in her eyes that made it hard to look at her.

The truth was that Shen Jiu did not say anything because he knew it was useless. If those in power decided that you were guilty there was no way to prove them wrong. Protesting only

made them more angry. And in this case he truly was guilty.

"She did not lie about her identity. I knew full well who she was when I hired her," said Jiang Fengmian. Shen Jiu's stomach twisted.

What was he doing? Why was he lying?

The whispers got louder. Yu Ziyuan stood up from the chair as if she wanted to rush to her husband and do something. Shake him probably. Shen Jiu surely wanted to do that.

"You knew who she was and you still hired her?! To teach our children!? Are you insane?"

Jiang Fengmian stepped forward to face his wife. "As soon as I saw Madam Shen, I recognised her. She looked exactly like my old nanny, Wei Changze's mother. It is not common knowledge, but many years ago my friend told me in confidence that his bastard sister was sold into slavery when she was a baby. With a likeness this significant, I knew for sure that it was her. I also knew her past."

"Wei Changze? Like my dad?" asked Wei Ying quietly. "Is Shizun…"

"We will talk about this later," said Shen Jiu.

"Madam Shen was frank about her past with me from the very beginning," said Jiang Fengmian. It took a lot of Shen Jiu not to react to the blatant lie. "Her past was no fault of her own. She was sold as a child and had no choice in her occupation. She deserved a second chance in life. That's why I kept her past a secret."

Did he really know? Or did he lie on the spot to cover for Shen Jiu? There was no way to tell and no time to think.

He heard one elder whisper "Wei Changze saved my son's life once," and felt a stupid pang of hope.

"It doesn't matter that you knew! She is still a run-away whore," said Yu Ziyuan. There were red splotches on her cheeks that made her look half mad. Shen Jiu wondered whether he used to look the same way when he was particularly incensed.

"She is a free woman now. Her contract burned together with the Hundred Flowers Tower," said Jiang Fengmian.

"We have yet to touch upon the most damning evidence. Wang Anxin, tell us what happened during the fire!" ordered Yu Ziyuan.

"She was wandering the halls when she was supposed to be bedridden. A lazy woman, she did not want to work, and the Madam let her slack off. She always had a soft spot for Meng Shi and her brat. If any other whore decided to…"

"Keep to the point!" hissed Yu Ziyuan.

"Of course, your grace! When the Madam was found stabbed after the fire, it was clear to me who did this. Everybody knew Meng Shi argued with her a few days before the fire and she went missing right after. The facts speak for themselves. She is the murderer!"

"This is conjecture," said Jiang Fengmian. "Vindictive speculations from a single biased source with no evidence whatsoever."

"She is the only witness we have! And think of this: how could a sick woman with a child and no funds run away this easily? She is smart, so it makes sense she went for the funds before running. And when confronted she took out a knife…"

"I have another witness," interrupted Jiang Fengmian.

"Who?"

With all the accusations being thrown in his face, Shen Jiu had missed Yu Bo return. And with him was…

"My name is Li Sisi," she said as she stepped forward to stand above Anxin. "I also used to work at the Hundred Flowers Tower. Meng Shi told me about her plans to run away. That's why I know that by the time the fire started she was long gone."

"Of course you lie for her now…" started Anxin, but was quickly interrupted.

"Anxin is an old rival of Meng Shi so she gladly took the chance to make accusations and get revenge. Even though the magistrate determined that the fire and the murder were the work of bandits."

"As the establishment no longer exists and the contract has been destroyed, I saw no reason to make Madam Shen's past public knowledge," said Jiang Fengmian.

"So what are you saying? You want our children to be taught by a whore?" asked Yu Ziyuan. "I won't allow it!"

"Then she will no longer teach them. You are their mother, it is your right. However, Madam Shen will have sanctuary in Lotus Pier for as long as she needs it," said Jiang Fengmian firmly.

"And you lot are just going to allow it?" asked Yu Ziyuan, addressing the elders.

"It's the Sect Leader's decision," said one of the elders, who looked bored. "I do not know why we had to get involved at all. This is a private matter."

"Madam Yu just wants us to control her husband for her," said another elder quietly, but judging by Yu Ziyuan's face she heard him clearly.

"She is Wei Changze's sister, so it's only natural to offer her shelter," said another. "I am not so sure about her teaching the Sect's heir, but as she will teach no more I don't think it's our place to interfere."

"She did save the heir's life, didn't she? Sending her away after that wouldn't be righteous."

"I cannot believe you!" screamed Yu Ziyuan, losing all the remaining composure.

Jiang Fengmian stepped out, and faced the elders, "I would like you all to keep what you learned today a secret for the sake of the sect. I know my decision was an emotional one, and this information might harm our image. I am sorry that I put you all in this position. Now if you don't have any questions, I think this meeting can be dismissed."

People started to leave, still whispering. Shen Jiu had no hope of his past staying a secret.

He noticed Jiang Fengmian exchange quick words with his wife as they left together, clearly about to have an explosive fight. Shen Jiu would have to catch him later. They clearly needed to talk.

"Go to Quiet Lotus Pavilion and stay there," he told Meng Yao and Wei Ying. Without waiting for their reply, he took Sisi by the elbow and led her away from the crowd. He didn't need anybody present for that conversation.

He didn't let go of Sisi until they were far away from the main hall and had some privacy. Only then did he look in her judgmental face.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Thank you, Sisi, for lying for me after everything I did. You know that I lied to the magistrate as well? Told them I saw a strange man inside." Her words were full of poison, but Shen Jiu noticed a shadow of hurt in Sisi's eyes.

Shen Jiu bit the inside of his cheek. "Thank you," he said quietly.

"Don't mention it. I did it for A-Yao."

"How did you get there so quickly?" asked Shen Jiu. "Did Jiang Fengmian contact you himself or was it one of his disciples?"

"That man of yours came to speak to me a few months after our meeting. He said that he would buy me a house and give me enough money to last me a lifetime if I helped him protect you when needed."

So Jiang Fengmian must have investigated Sisi. Then he decided to keep her close in case somebody found out about Meng Shi's past. Shen Jiu was both angry and impressed.

He looked at Sisi and sighed. Whatever game Jiang Fengmian was playing, Sisi did nothing wrong. It was quite the opposite in fact. She lied for him… or as she had said before for Meng Yao. The boy would likely want to speak to her at some point.

"If you were here this whole time, you could have written. A-Yao would have liked to see you."

"Would you let him? I thought we weren't supposed to know each other."

She was probably right. Shen Jiu grit his teeth.

"Give me your address. Now there is not much point in being secretive." After Shen Jiu had it, he tracked down Yu Bo and found out where the Sect Leader was. Then he ordered the head disciple to take Sisi back home.

Jiang Fengmian was in his office, and even through the closed door Yu Ziyuan's voice was unmistakable. Shen Jiu shook his head. The two should have invested in silencing talismans a long time ago because it was honestly embarrassing.

"What will happen to A-Cheng's prospects if it comes out that he was taught by a whore! No girl from a respectable family would marry him! And what of A-Li's engagement? Do you want to make us into laughing stock!?"

There was a thumping sound. Shen Jiu decided to walk away instead of facing Yu Ziyuan once she finally left. He went around a corner and stood there for a while, until he heard the door slam and Yu Ziyuan stomp away. Once he was sure she was gone, he went inside the office.

There was a red spot on Jiang Fengmian's face and three parallel lines, likely made by nails. Being slapped was nothing for a cultivator of his level, but seeing this still made Shen Jiu feel uneasy. He closed the door behind him.

"You could divorce her for that," Shen Jiu mused. Usually he had some sympathy for Yu Ziyuan but after she made a public mockery of him and his children he wasn't feeling charitable.

"Why would I divorce her?" asked Jiang Fengmian, seemingly genuinely appalled.

"Why did you marry her in the first place? You don't seem to like her much," said Shen Jiu.

Jiang Fengmian sighed. "I married her because she is capable and I knew we could get along. We used to get along…"

"Well, I don't think you are getting along after that."

That was an understatement.

"How did this come to that? I thought she would come to me directly… Why did she have to…"

"So you knew that she would find out one day," said Shen Jiu.

"I… I'm sorry. I didn't want to worry you with this…"

"So you went snooping about my past behind my back."

"I needed to know what could pose danger to you! Once I found out, I knew it was only a matter of time before Yu Ziyuan did the same. Though I thought we would have at least five years..."

Shen Jiu couldn’t believe that man.

"Why didn’t you tell me you knew?"

Jiang Fengmian sighed. "I always suspected that your past was difficult. For girls, being sold usually ends one way, and you did seem to know your way around the flower house…"

"It was a brothel. Call it what it is," huffed Shen Jiu.

"I simply didn’t know how to tell you, and I didn’t want you to think it changed my opinion of you in any way…"

"It didn’t change your opinion?"

"Of course it didn’t! It wasn’t your choice."

What was he trying to prove? Did he want to flaunt his righteousness and forgiveness in Shen Jiu’s face? Make him believe he could be forgiven no matter what and then condemn him for his rotten nature?

"I did kill the brothel Madam like Anxin suggested. I cut her throat with my own hands. She was still choking on her own blood when I robbed her. Does that change your opinion of me?" asked Shen Jiu. He regretted his confession as soon as it left his mouth.

"You must have had your reasons," said Jiang Fengmian, though his voice wavered. It must have been hard to realize that he was harbouring a murderer. And after that trial he could not persecute Shen Jiu without losing face.

"Are you so sure about that? Do you know anything about me other than that image you have?"

"I know that you love your son. Whatever you did must have been for his sake," said Jiang Fengmian with such certainty that Shen Jiu was taken aback. "And I know that you did risk your position several times to save my son."

"I am going to stay at Quiet Lotus Pavilion for the time being. If you need to talk to me, send a letter first," said Shen Jiu and left. He didn’t know what to think of this man.

The boys were waiting for him in the main room of the Quiet Lotus Pavilion when he finally came home. Wei Ying sprang to his feet as soon as he saw him.

"Is that true, Shizun? Are you my father’s sister?"

"I don’t know. Jiang Fengmian seems to think so." He was too tired to deal with this.

"I told you it doesn’t change anything," said Meng Yao. "You are still my little brother."

"But… I don’t know. Should I call you ‘Auntie’, Shizun? You don’t look like an Auntie…"

"Blood relations are overrated anyway. Even if you are related to me, it doesn't change anything," said Shen Jiu.

"What should we do next, Mother? If everybody knows…" asked Meng Yao, visibly uneasy.

"Deny everything if asked. Your father's identity wasn't discussed, so they cannot know for sure you're a bastard. I will remain here in seclusion for now. The less people see of me, the better."

"It won't stop people from talking," said Meng Yao.

"There is nothing we can do to stop people from talking. I need to form my golden core. Once I have it, we can leave and survive on our own as rogue cultivators."

"But I don't want to leave," said Wei Ying.

Why was he making it difficult? Shen Jiu clenched his fists, making his nails bite into the meat of his palms.

"You can stay. Jiang Fengmian will be happy to have you," said Shen Jiu bitterly.

"I don't want to stay without you," said Wei Ying, his eyes teary.

"Then don't complain. I'm going to my room. Don't bother me unless something urgent happens."

As soon as he closed the door behind him, his gaze fell on the tasteful vase decorated with pink lotuses. He picked it up and hurled it at the floor. Once it was lying there in broken pieces, he stomped on the glass shards, making them crunch under his feet.

Damn it all.

He settled on the floor among the broken glass and took the meditation pose. If he wanted to get his golden core soon, he needed to put in the work.

Chapter 18: To save a child.

Wei Ying looked around eagerly as they walked through the village, but to his disappointment the most interesting thing around was a chicken that was pecking at the grass next to the road. And it wasn't even an interesting looking chicken!

"This village is so small and quiet! I don't know how people can live in places like this their whole lives. Don't they get bored?" asked Wei Ying.

Several villagers had gone out of their houses to watch their procession. It was probably the first time they saw cultivators in the flesh, so Wei Ying waved and smiled at them. A small child waved back from behind his mother. Wei Ying beamed at him.

"It's not like they have much choice, A-Ying. A son of a fisherman has few roads in life and a daughter even less. Most of these people cannot read or write and they know little of the world outside their village," said Yue Yao.

"That's awful," said Jiang Yanli. It was the first time she had joined them on a night hunt, which made some sense. Before this, all they had been allowed to do was deal with water ghouls. This was the first time they had gotten to investigate something since the child-stealing spirit three years ago.

They followed their guide along the muddy main road to a sturdy but small house. The main room could barely fit all of the disciples once they came inside.

Their procession was greeted politely by an old man who looked like a prune. He was so old that he struggled to lift himself out of his bow and the young man had to help him. They all bowed back as they had been told.

"Tell us what has been happening in your village to make you ask for aid," said Yu Bo politely. He had been the head disciple for almost two years, and Wei Ying could hardly imagine anyone else in this position.

"It started with Deng Hu a month ago. We found him next to the river. Beaten black and blue. We thought he had a fight with someone. He liked to drink and got in fights often. But then a week later Fu Ye's wife ran out of her house crying that her husband was dead. He was also covered with bruises and his wife swore that nobody entered their house that night."

The old man coughed and the young man offered him water. Wei Ying suspected that this was his grandson. It was hard to tell if they looked alike because of all the wrinkles.

"Only five days passed when the whole Lei family was killed - father, mother, the eldest son. Only their youngest was left alive."

"Where is the boy now?" asked Yu Bo. "We'll need to talk to him."

"He was taken in by Dong Guang. She is the widow of the last man to die. Xie Guo died a week and a half after the Lei family, and there was no deaths after him."

"At this point our village will run out of able men," added the grandson, his face grim.

"We will do our best to make your village safe again," said Yu Bo. "Those young cultivators with me are still learning, so please indulge them as they ask you some questions."

"I don't care as long as you stop more people from dying. Ask as many questions as you need," said the old man.

Wei Ying could see Yue Yao and Jiang Yanli whisper among themselves. It seemed that as the oldest disciples in their group, they decided to let the young ones practice.

"Did the victims have anything in common?" asked Jiang Cheng. He had his arms crossed. When he did that he looked like a smaller, cuter version of his mother. It was funny.

"They were all fishermen, except Lei Kang's wife. That's what we do in our village. Other than that I can't think of anything," said the old man.

"Did they know each other?" asked Jiang Liao.

"Of course they did. Our village is small. Everybody knows everybody here."

"Were the Lei family and Xie Guo also found in their houses?" asked Gao Hiaoli.

"The Lei family was but Xie Guo was outside, next to the well."

They kept asking questions but didn't find out anything interesting. Wei Ying was aching to go talk to the surviving boy. He had an easier time finding common ground with other children than with the adults.

Wei Ying stopped fidgeting with his clarity bell and looked up. "Did all the victims have children?"

"No, only the Lei family," said the old man.

The grandson shook his head. "Deng Hu had a son, don't you remember? His wife died after giving birth, so the boy used to wander on his own around the village like a stray. He ran away from home a few months ago.

"Oh, right, I forgot about him. A squirrely little thing," said the old man. "He likely perished in the woods."

"What was his name?" asked Jiang Yanli. Her eyes were sad as she asked that.

"Deng Tao," said the grandson.

The interrogation didn't yield much else, and afterwards, they were taken to the big house on the outskirts of the village. It came with a large plot of land with plum trees and vegetable

patches. There was an old woman in brown clothes tending to the cabbages.

"Dong Guang," called their guide. "Those cultivators want to talk to you."

The woman looked up at them, her eyes widening under her wide-brimmed bamboo hat. Then she bowed to them with such haste that some of her grey hair escaped from under her hat.

"Can you tell us about the day your husband died?" asked Yu Bo.

"It was like any other day. He went to get water and didn't return. When I came to look for him, he was lying there, dead." She seemed strangely calm as she spoke as if she were speaking about a donkey or a goat, not about her husband.

They asked her some more questions but each answer was curt and barren. The disciples quickly ran out of things to ask, asking useless questions about the victim's health and habits. Having noticed that, Yu Bo asked, "And what of the boy you have taken in? Where is he?"

"Lazing around in the fields. He runs off after doing even a little work, so I won't ask him to do more. If my husband were alive, he would straighten him up," grumbled the old woman.

"Perhaps we should be the ones to talk to him, Shixiong?" asked Yue Yao politely. "A child will be more comfortable talking to other children."

"Not if we come all together," said Jiang Yanli. "He'll feel ambushed."

"Young Master Jiang, who would you send?" asked Yu Bo. He did this a lot, asking Jiang Cheng for his opinion. Yue Yao said that it was part of preparing their friend to lead the Sect one day.

"Wei Ying is good with talking to people, so he can take the lead. A-Jie and Yue Yao can smooth things over if he messes up," said Jiang Cheng so seriously that it was funny.

"Why don't you supervise me yourself?" asked Wei Ying.

"As if you have ever listened to me!"

"You still have to go. I'll be bored without you. How will you appreciate my interrogative skills if you aren't there?" complained Wei Ying. He really didn't want to leave Jiang Cheng behind. The four of them worked well together.

"Of course he'd choose his relatives," Jiang Quan sneered, so loud that everybody could hear him. "Must be nice to be so favored."

It had been a while since somebody mentioned this particular rumor.

"Don't be silly! Everybody knows that Madam Shen was one of the Emperor's concubines. She wouldn't cheat on the Emperor!" said Jiang Liao.

"You are the silly one! Does Yue Yao seem like a son of the Emperor to you?" asked Jiang Quan incredulously.

"He is pretty enough! Doesn't he look a bit like Jin Yu? They say that the Jin are distantly related to the Emperor…"

"Are you two cultivators or gossiping fishwives?" asked Yu Bo calmly. He didn't raise his voice, but the disciples still quieted. "If I hear this kind of talk again, I'll ban you from night hunts."

"Sorry, Shixiong!" said the two at the same time. They knew that Yu Bo didn't make idle threats.

"Young Master Jiang, take the people you chose and interrogate the boy. We are going to speak to other witnesses and return here."

"I told that stupid Jiang Quan to stop, but he still runs his mouth," grumbled Jiang Cheng once the four of them separated from the group.

"It's his father's work," said Jiang Yanli quietly. "He seems to think that Father used to attend Shizun's old… workplace."

It was still funny to hear someone else call her Shizun. After the trial she was no longer Jiang Yanli's teacher, but the girl kept coming to Quiet Lotus Pavilion with a weiqi board or with her new painting. Shizun didn't show it, but she was happy to have a visitor. She hardly ever left their home, so it was nice for her to have company that wasn't Wei Ying and Yue Yao.

"What does he even want to achieve?" asked Wei Ying.

"He wants Yue Yao to inherit," said Jiang Cheng. "So that Yu Clan has no influence." He frowned as he said that, and Wei Ying could tell that he was repeating what his mother had told him.

"Well, that's just stupid," said Wei Ying.

"Politics are always stupid," said Jiang Cheng. Yue Yao and Jiang Yanli exchanged whispers. They were like that sometimes, acting as if Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng were little children, even though they were already twelve years old and only a year younger than Yue Yao.

They didn't have to look for their witness. A boy, perhaps seven or eight years old, ran out of the bushes and almost ran into Jiang Cheng. He stopped in his tracks as soon as he noticed them, clearly startled. Then he glanced behind as if he expected someone else to crawl out of the bushes.

"Are you alright?" asked Jiang Yanli. "Was somebody chasing you?"

"Who are you? You are not from here," demanded the boy. He was small but his demeanour was grumpy. Like a tiny old man, or a tiny Jiang Cheng.

"Mind your tone! You're talking to a lady," said Jiang Cheng. There was a reason he didn't volunteer himself to interrogate the witness.

"What is a lady doing here?" asked the kid.

"We are cultivators! Isn't it impressive?" asked Wei Ying. He always liked to see people's reaction when he said he was a cultivator. They got so curious and excited.

"You don't have swords," said the kid bluntly. "You can't be a cultivator without a sword."

"We are still in training. I have some talismans though! Do you want to see? This one is fun, it can…" Wei Ying put his hand into his sleeve trying to find the right talisman to impress a child.

The boy interrupted him. "Aren't they like paper with characters? It's boring."

What an unpleasant witness they had! But Wei Ying didn't lose hope. They still had their best interrogator with them.

"You're right. We were just playing cultivators. Do you want to play with us?" asked Yue Yao brightly. "Our carriage wheel broke, so we'll have to stay in this village for a few days. It will be nice to have a new friend to play with."

"I already have a friend," said the boy proudly.

"He can play with us too," said Wei Ying. He brightened, playing along with his brother. A game like that could be a great way to learn what the boy knew.

"I don't know," said the kid, studying them with such scrutiny that Wei Ying was reminded of Shizun. "I'll have to ask him."

"We can ask all together," said Jiang Yanli.

"He won't show up if you all just barge in," said the boy.

"Is he shy?" asked Jiang Yanli.

"No."

That was a pretty unusual friend there.

"We can wait for you here," said Yue Yao gently. The kid gave them a suspicious look before leaving.

"Why do you need to make things complicated? We could have just asked him directly," complained Jiang Cheng.

"He wouldn't answer. I can tell he is hiding something," said Yue Yao.

"I'll make friends with him. Just you wait," said Wei Ying. He was sure of his skills. He did befriend Jiang Cheng after all.

The boy returned alone. "He said he is busy, but I can play with you."

"That's great," said Yue Yao. They took a moment to introduce themselves and only then the boy told them his name, "It's Lei Min."

"So, Lei Min," started Yue Yao. He liked using people's names. "Do you want to be a cultivator or a ghost?"

"A ghost," said Lei Min immediately.

"Then we can be ghosts together!" said Wei Ying. "We'll haunt you all to death before you know it!"

"Why would you say it like that?" asked Jiang Cheng.

"I'm getting into the role." He bared his teeth at his friend. "Do I look scary?"

"You look like an idiot," said Jiang Cheng.

"Ghosts aren't scary," said Lei Min with strange determination. "They look just like people, but their eyes are black." The mood suddenly became somber. They all knew that the description was fitting. That meant that Lei Min likely watched his family get killed.

"We can use these as talismans," said Jiang Yanli, showing them the loose paper pieces she had. It looked like her handwriting.

"Is it a draft of your letter to Jin Yu? I don't know why you are still writing to him. You can do much better," said Wei Ying.

For almost three years Jiang Yanli had been exchanging letters with that pompous peacock. She and Yue Yao spent hours drafting letters together and then the idiot would write a lackluster response describing the weather and reporting on his dog's health.

In Wei Ying's opinion, Jiang Yanli and Yue Yao would be a better couple. They were the nicest people in the world, so they clearly deserved each other.

"That's none of your business, A-Ying," said Yue Yao with a dangerous smile. This kind of smile meant that Wei Ying would be chided at home for this.

"Let's start playing already, or we will be standing here all day," said Jiang Cheng. "You are ghosts, so you should run. We will try to catch you and stick a talisman on you."

"We need to have special powers too," said Lei Min.

"Like what?" asked Wei Ying.

"Ghosts can freeze you. So, if we say freeze, you should stop," said Lei Min confidently.

"But how are we supposed to catch you if you do that?" asked Jiang Cheng.

"Well, it's your problem. You are the ones hunting us, even if we didn't do anything bad," said Lei Min.

"You hurt people. That's why we need to stop you," said Yue Yao.

"They deserved it. They were bad people," said Lei Min.

"And who can decide if the person deserves death? Can the ghost just tell? What if they make a mistake?" asked Yue Yao.

"Ghosts aren't stupid! They can tell. If you hurt someone, you are bad!"

"But how much hurt is enough to deserve murder?" asked Yue Yao.

Lei Min's cheeks puffed in indignation. "You don't understand anything! I don't want to play with you anymore!"

He ran away. Yue Yao followed the boy's retreat with a calm expression.

"You can go after him, A-Ying. Just be careful. If something strange or dangerous happens, activate the flare talisman immediately."

Wei Ying did as he was told, but he didn't like it. Yue Yao was a kind person and the best older brother in the whole world, but he rarely said that he really wanted. He would rather say a thousand words to make you decide to do something, instead of asking you to do it like a normal person. It could be really annoying.

It wasn't difficult to catch up to Lei Min, who glared at Wei Ying when he realised he was being followed.

"Go away!"

"But I'm your fellow ghost. We should stick together!"

"I'm not playing any more!"

"You know I like ghosts too. I knew a good one once. She was just trying to protect people from an evil man."

"What happened to her?"

"She killed the man and then moved on. We did all the rites for her so she would have a good after life."

Lei Min gave him a long look as if considering something. "Do you want to meet my friend?"

"Of course!" Wei Ying didn't expect that something dark would separate from Lei Min's shadow and take the form of a ten-year-old boy covered in bruises. He could be taken for a

real person if it wasn't for his black eyes and the cold prickle of resentment Wei Ying now recognised. This was something he felt when he and Shizun went to the Burial Mounds to speak to the ghosts.

"You aren't afraid," said the ghost curiously.

"You aren't the first ghost I have seen. And Lei Min said that you only kill bad people."

"My family was hurting me and Deng Tao saved me from them!" said Lei Min. "He also got rid of that nasty old man!"

"Xie Guo?" asked Wei Ying. He got the impression that the new guardians could be harsh on Lei Min. "Are you going to kill Dong Guang next?"

To Wei Ying's relief, the boy shook his head. "She is mean but she is all words."

"There are no cruel people who hurt their family in this village anymore," said the ghost with an unsettlingly serene smile.

"It's strange that you didn't move on," mused Wei Ying. "The ghost I knew disappeared after she killed the man who murdered her."

"I don't want to go away," said the ghost. "I want to see the snow again, and swim in the river in the summer, and play with Lei Min some more. He is my best friend. I need to protect him."

"You should just stay forever," said Lei Min.

Wei Ying looked at the ghost and the boy. They reminded him of himself and Yue Yao. If his older brother died, he would never want him to leave. The ghost looked almost human. Not like the twisted ghosts Wei Ying saw at the Burial Mounds. If he only wanted to protect, perhaps there wouldn't be any harm if…

"Do you promise not to kill people anymore?" asked Wei Ying seriously.

"If they don't hurt Lei Min, I won't touch anybody," said the ghost.

"Then I'll keep your secret," said Wei Ying. He still wasn't sure how he'd talk Yu Bo into leaving without dealing with the ghost. Likely he would have to lie, which he didn't really want to do. Perhaps Yue Yao and Jiang Yanli could think of something.

He went back to his friends, but when he told them about the ghost, they looked grim.

"We need to tell Yu Bo. He'll make arrangements to look for the kid's body," said Jiang Cheng.

"What? But I told you he isn't dangerous…" said Wei Ying.

"A-Ying, it's nice that you want to help this ghost, but he isn't supposed to stay in the living world," said Jiang Yanli. "We'll make sure he passes along peacefully."

"He is just a child like Lei Min! All they have is each other! Can't we give him a chance?"

Yue Yao shook his head. "What do you think is going to happen if he breaks his promise? If Lei Min gets in a fight, and the ghost kills somebody? What are they going to say about Yunmeng Jiang Sect?"

"You always care so much about what they are going to say! They say so many things about Shizun, and you, and me, but it doesn't change who we are."

"We are cultivators," interrupted Yue Yao. "Our duty is to protect the living. This ghost already murdered six people. Getting rid of it is non-negotiable."

"But Shizun…"

"That was a different situation. Mother would agree with me."

Knowing that he lost, Wei Ying followed the group sullenly. When Yu Bo clapped him on the shoulder, praising him for his discovery, Wei Ying just looked down at the muddy ground.

"Can't we just let Deng Tao be?" he asked.

"I'm sorry, shidi, but we can't trust its word. We spoke to Fu Ye's wife while you were away. The woman is so devastated she is barely functional. Even if her husband was harsh, she didn't want him dead. We don't know what the ghost will consider abuse worthy of murder."

"He promised not to touch anybody unless they hurt Lei Min!"

"I'm afraid it's not enough. It needs to be dealt with for everybody's safety."

Wei Ying dragged his feet while searching the forest for a fresh grave with all the other disciples. He didn't really want to find it. He imagined Lei Min's face when he would find out his friend was gone, and winced. They wouldn't even get to say goodbye.

It was wrong. Perhaps Deng Tao couldn't stay but he should at least say goodbye to his best friend.

Wei Ying straightened his back. He needed to warn Deng Tao and for that he needed to find him. Wei Ying tried to find the cold and wet prickle of resentment energy that he could always feel next to the Burial Mounds. It felt a bit like cold sweat after a nightmare.

Wei Ying got away from his group, following the feeling he couldn't fully describe. Like a cold and wet draft brushing over his cheek and disappearing just to return again. He wasn't sure it was actually working until he saw Deng Tao waiting for him near a fresh patch of dirt.

"Are you buried here?" he asked.

"You brought cultivators after me," said Deng Tao, his voice ringing with resentment.

"I didn't mean to! I'm sorry! Before they get here you can…"

"I won’t run anymore. I know how to keep myself safe."

"What are you…" Wei Ying wasn’t able to finish the sentence, because Deng Tao’s hand shot out, grabbing his neck, and it was like he fell into a pool of ice-cold water. The world around him turned dark.

One moment he was standing on his own feet and the next he was curled up on the cold ground that smelled like a fresh grave.

"Useless brat! If it wasn’t for you, your mother would still be here!" shouted a deep voice. Wei Ying felt the grass under his hands, but before he could scramble to his feet, a boot slammed into his ribs. The impact kicked all the air out of his lungs leaving him breathless.

"Disgusting," said the man. Wei Ying looked up, his vision unclear… Was he crying?

There was a thin man standing over him. He was just a mortal peasant. With his cultivation Wei Ying could…

"I should have drowned you when you were born," said the man, and kicked Wei Ying in the jaw. He tried to protect himself with cultivation, to push the man away with a burst of qi, but it didn’t listen to him.

"Dad, please stop!" he screamed, but his voice sounded wrong. He could taste his own blood. The man moved to kick him again, but before it connected a loud and clear sound broke through the illusion. It was the familiar chime of a clarity bell.

The light of the day was almost blinding. Wei Ying felt the fresh dirt under his back and saw the tree tops towering over him. Was he lying on Deng Tao’s grave?

"A-Ying! Are you alright?" called Yue Yao. He was kneeling at Wei Ying’s side with a clarity bell in his hand. So he was the one who pulled him out of the dream.

"Everything hurts," complained Wei Ying. The last time he felt like that was during the only winter he had spent on his own. He had gotten the snot beaten out of him by other street brats, and then had nearly frozen to death before finding a new shelter.

"Everything will hurt even more when I’m done with you!" shouted Jiang Cheng. "Do you have a death wish? Or is your head that empty?!"

"A-Cheng, be kinder," scolded Jiang Yanli. "We don’t know what happened…"

"It’s obvious," said Yue Yao. "Wei Ying underestimated the danger and didn’t call for back up when he saw the ghost."

"Can’t you go back to worrying about me?" asked Wei Ying.

"What is going on here?" asked Yu Bo strictly. Wei Ying huddled closer to his brother, unable to meet the head disciple’s eyes. He was in so much trouble.

The head disciple didn’t scream at him or threaten punishment. He just looked disappointed which was much worse. He also forbade Wei Ying from taking part in putting the spirit to rest, making him stay with the horses together with Yue Yao who kept fussing over him, despite himself.

It didn’t take long for the rest of the disciples to return. They went straight back to the sect after that and Wei Ying dreaded their return. Shizun was going to be really mad at him and there was no escaping that.

Wei Ying expected that once they got back, they would report to Jiang Fengmian, who would scold him gently and send him on his way to be killed by Shizun in peace. What he didn’t know was that Yu Ziyuan had returned to the sect from her night hunt.

"Let me get it straight," she said as Wei Ying looked at his feet. "You tried to warn the ghost so the other disciples would not banish it. Was that your endgame?"

"I wanted… This disciple made a mistake," said Wei Ying. The less he said to Yu Ziyuan the better. Explaining himself would hardly help.

"It was not just a mistake. It was a betrayal of everything our sect stands for. Come with me," she said, turning around. Wei Ying followed her to the courtyard feeling uneasy. He knew that whatever was going to happen would not be pleasant.

"Wei Ying, kneel. Yu Bo, bring me a whip," she ordered. Something in her voice reminded Wei Ying of the man from his vision. He knelt down, shivering.

"Madam Yu, Wei Ying did make a mistake, but the only person he endangered was himself. He already…" started Yu Bo.

"Are you doubting me? Bring me the whip or you’re going to be punished together with him!"

"Mother, isn’t it too harsh? Wei Ying is already wounded…" said Jiang Cheng. He and the other disciples were gathered around them, their eyes fearful. In his three years in the sect Wei Ying had never seen somebody whipped, so he understood their reaction. He looked for his brother in the crowd, but couldn’t find him.

"Silence," ordered Yu Ziyuan. "You should be happy I’m using a regular whip. The proper punishment for something like that is banishment, but we know your father won’t allow it."

"Father won’t be happy with the whipping either," said Jiang Yanli.

"Let him be angry," said Yu Ziyuan. Wei Ying looked up at her and was startled by the hatred in her eyes. What did he ever do to her?

Yu Bo returned with a whip, his face solemn. He gave a quick anxious glance to Wei Ying but looked away quickly, giving the whip to Yu Ziyuan with a bow.

Wei Ying clenched his fists, trying to calm himself. He would be able to take it. He had worse on the streets, hadn’t he? This whip had nothing on the stray dogs. He would just sleep on his

stomach for a few weeks. Though it would be difficult with his bruised ribs.

"Mother, please!" begged Jiang Cheng again.

"It's alright," said Wei Ying. He wanted to say that he deserved the punishment but then he heard the whip cut through air and squeezed his eyes shut, his whole body tensing. Wei Ying waited for pain but it didn't come.

"What right do you have to punish my disciple?" Shizun's voice was as sharp as the knife she kept under her pillow.

Wei Ying looked back and saw Shizun hold Yu Ziyuan's wrist in an iron grip. The whip was hanging uselessly. Somehow Shizun managed to look menacing despite being a head shorter than Yu Ziyuan.

"He is a disciple of Yunmeng Jiang, so I am entitled to punish him for transgressions. Do you even know what he had done?" asked Yu Ziyuan.

"It doesn't matter. We both know that it's not what you are punishing him for."

"And what am I punishing him for?" asked Yu Ziyuan, ripping her wrist out of Shizun's grip.

"Your problem is with me and me alone. If you want to let out your rage on somebody, fight me," said Shizun. Wei Ying wasn't sure he had ever seen her this angry before.

"Fight you?" scoffed Yu Ziyuan. "As if you are a match to me."

"You might be surprised. I've been sparring with Jiang Fengmian for years and he is impressed with my skills," said Shizun imperiously.

Yu Ziyuan looked as if she had been slapped, "You little…. Give us space! We are going to duel properly!"

Wei Ying felt somebody drag him up by the arm. He saw his brother's frightened eyes.

"Is this my fault?" he asked in a small voice.

"Of course not. It was only a matter of time," said Yue Yao gently. His grip on Wei Ying's arm was so tight it was almost painful. "Come on, we don't want to get in the way."

Despite his brother's words, Wei Ying couldn't escape the feeling that he was at fault here.

Chapter 19: Breaking a whip.

Using spiritual energy to make himself move faster, Shen Jiu rushed through the training ground. His hand clasped around Yu Ziyuan's wrist in an iron grip just as she began her downward strike. With its momentum severed, the whip fell, impotent.

For a moment the silence was deafening. All Shen Jiu could hear was the rush of blood in his ears.

"What right do you have to punish my disciple?" His voice was as biting as the morning frost in the dead of autumn. As he spoke, he tightened his grip. If Yu Ziyuan were a regular person, her wrist would already have broken.

If anyone had the right to whip the idiotic brat, it was Shen Jiu, not some self-important gentry woman who thought too highly of herself. Shen Jiu had numerous reasons to punish the brat over the years, though he avoided using physical punishment after a particular incident.

It happened a month into their stay at Sun Peizhi's estate. Wei Ying had been messing around despite numerous warnings, and he ended up breaking an extremely expensive vase. Furious, Shen Jiu raised his hand to slap the brat, but before he could do that, Meng Yao jumped in front of him, begging for lenience.

The way he pleaded with Wei Ying behind his back reminded Shen Jiu of something long forgotten. He had always been a mouthy child, getting in trouble with the slavers, and Yue Qi would always beg for lenience on his behalf.

He hadn't wanted to see the scene repeated, so he chose a different punishment or ordered Meng Yao to deal with it. He had his own ways of collaring the brat.

"He is a disciple of Yunmeng Jiang Sect, so I am entitled to punish him for transgressions. Do you even know what he had done?" asked Yu Ziyuan.

Entitled she was.

When Meng Yao rushed to warn him, the boy did not have the time to explain what the excuse for the punishment was. Not that the excuse mattered.

"It doesn't matter. We both know it's not what you are punishing him for."

"And what am I punishing him for?" Yu Ziyuan had to use her cultivation to rip her wrist out of Shen Jiu's grasp.

"Your problem is with me and me alone. If you want to let out your rage on somebody, fight me," said Shen Jiu.

This meant the end of their stay at Lotus Pier. No matter who won or lost, there would be no way for them to stay after that. But before they left, Shen Jiu wanted this vile woman to suffer. She deserved that for trying to lay a hand on something that belonged to him.

It would also be a good way to check his new golden core in action.

"Fight you? As if you are a match to me."

This was so reminiscent of Liu Qingge's words that it made Shen Jiu's blood boil.

"You might be surprised. I've been sparring with Jiang Fengmian for years and he is impressed with my skills." He knew he was digging his nails into an open wound and he relished it.

"You little… Give us space! We are going to duel properly!"

The disciples scrambled to create space for their duel, but did not go too far, their eyes fearful but curious. Shen Jiu noticed Meng Yao drag Wei Ying out of the way and gave him a curt nod of approval.

Slowly, he drew the sword out of the qiankun pouch in his sleeve. It was a fine blade, though the gaudy flowers adorning its hilt were tasteless. An expensive thing, it could withstand a duel, but compared to a proper spiritual sword it was lacking.

"Are you going to fight me with this?" scoffed Yu Ziyuan.

"You should have more respect. It was a present from Fengmian." Shen Jiu had never called Jiang Fengmian by his personal name before, even when they were in private. He couldn't have chosen a better moment to use it: Yu Ziyuan sparkled with fury, her spiritual energy crackling around her ring.

"I use both a whip and a sword. You can use this if you want to even the odds," said Yu Ziyuan, handing Shen Jiu the black whip she had been going to use on Wei Ying.

The weight of the whip felt familiar in his hand. Shen Jiu had whipped misbehaving disciples many times when he was still a Peak Lord. He never quite enjoyed it, but he hadn't felt guilty either. No matter what he did, it was usually just a fraction of what had been done to him when he was their age.

Usually, but not always.

He remembered the state of Luo Binghe's back after a punishment. One time Shen Jiu had become particularly angry and there was blood spilled. He was flashed with an image of Yu Ziyuan standing in front of kneeling Wei Ying with that disgusting thing in her hands. With her looking like his former body it was easy to imagine what he looked like when he was dealing out the punishment.

He felt like throwing up.

Shen Jiu crushed the handle of the whip, using his cultivation to destroy it completely. He should have done that to all the whips on Qing Jing Peak when he became the Peak Lord.

"I'm neither a slave owner nor an animal herder," he said, allowing the remains of the whip to fall to the ground.

"This is your choice to make," said Yu Ziyuan dismissively. "I'm not going to give myself a handicap on your behalf."

"I don't need one."

The dismissing look she gave him in response reminded Shen Jiu of Liu Qingge so much that he couldn't contain his anger and lunged at her with no warning. Yu Ziyuan parried his first strike easily but its force still took her by surprise, making her take a step back.

Shen Jiu did not give her a single moment to take back the initiative, forcing her to be on the defensive. Yu Ziyuan quickly got fed up with this role and purple sparkles danced around her hand as Zidian manifested.

Shen Jiu heard its crack before he saw the purple light. He immediately jumped backward, not eager to test his lacklustre sword against Zidian's power.

In the rush of the fight, he had forgotten that his stride was not as long as it used to be, so the tip of the whip managed to reach his cheek, leaving a stinging wound behind. He was going to pay Yu Ziyuan back for that.

Shen Jiu could not come close enough to cross blades with his opponent without getting in Zidian's range. That turned their duel into a cat-and-mouse chase: Yu Ziyuan lashed out at him furiously, marching forwards, while Shen Jiu stepped back, staying just out of reach. It was almost funny.

The more frustrated Yu Ziyuan got, the less grace there was in her strikes. Yet even from a distance, Shen Jiu could hear how much power she put in them. A single hit would be enough to end the fight.

He could not retreat forever. It was time for the kind of "lowlife" tactics he had been shamed for in his youth. As he channeled his spiritual energy into the dust of the training ground, Shen Jiu was able to create a small dust storm around Yu Ziyuan, blinding and distracting her. Using it to conceal his movements, he got close enough to kick her in the stomach. However, as Shen Jiu retreated, Zidian slithered around his ankle and made him lose his footing.

Fuming with annoyance, he aimed a slice at Yu Ziyuan's wrist, and she immediately released him, lest she lose a hand. As his opponent stepped back, Shen Jiu used his spiritual energy to turn one of his ribbons into a projectile. Yu Ziyuan caught it easily, but the distraction allowed him to scramble back to his feet.

As Shen Jiu once again stepped back from Yu Ziyuan's attacks, it became clear that he'd have to do something about Zidian. He had a useful talisman in his sleeve, but for it to work he

would have to get dangerously close. Gathering his energy, he launched himself into the air, flipping in a way that allowed him to land right behind her.

Before she realized what was going on, he slapped the talisman onto Yu Ziyuan's right arm. As the characters on the paper glowed, the arm fell limp. Zidian sparkled impotently as it hung down, trailing back in the dust.

"What did you do!?" growled Yu Ziyuan as she attacked him with her sword. Zidian, which was completely useless now, retracted into its ring form.

"A paralyzing talisman. Your arm will work again in an hour or two," explained Shen Jiu calmly, as he parried her increasingly violent slashes. It was clear as day he would win long before she got the use of her right arm back. Yu Ziyuan was too angry for strategy, so furious that she got out of breath, and without her main weapon there was no chance of her overpowering him by sheer power.

The sight was strangely familiar, though Shen Jiu usually was on the other side of things. It reminded him of one of his brawls with Liu Qingge, who was still Liu Mingjue then. The brute dislocated Shen Jiu's shoulder in the first minutes of the fight. Despite the injury, Shen Jiu kept attacking him desperately, making a disgrace of himself according to his fellow disciples. As if any of them would last even five minutes against the head disciple of Bai Zhan!

The emotions on Yu Ziyuan's face were painfully familiar: the feeling of inadequacy, the desire to prove that, no matter what people think, you actually deserve to stay here, that you belong, that you are worthy of respect…

What would people say about Yu Ziyuan when Shen Jiu won? There was no shame in losing to Liu Qingge, but it still killed him on the inside every time.

He had an opening. A single strike was all it would take to forever tarnish Yu Ziyuan's reputation. It was exactly what she deserved, but…

He faltered for too long. As he cursed himself for hesitating, Shen Jiu almost missed a hit. The renewed fire in Yu Ziyuan's eyes showed that she had noticed the weakness of his heart.

Shen Jiu could not let her win. Not after what she tried to do. She dared to…

The cursed memory of Luo Binghe resurfaced at the most unfortunate moment and that cost Shen Jiu his sword. As it flew out of his hand, he used all the spiritual energy he had left to push Yu Ziyuan back. Shen Jiu picked up his sword from the ground, but when he was ready to return to the duel, he was suddenly faced by a familiar back.

"What is going on here?" asked Jiang Fengmian. His voice was calm, but Shen Jiu couldn't see his face to tell for sure.

"Something we should have done a long time ago," said Yu Ziyuan, brushing the dust off her robes with her left hand. Her other arm was still hanging limp at her side.

"What happened to your arm?" asked Jiang Fengmian. "You should see a medic…"

"Don't pretend to care now! Not when your first instinct is to protect her from me," said Yu Ziyuan bitterly. "Let your favored pet tell you what happened. It's not like you care about what I think."

As she said that, Yu Ziyuan turned on her heel and walked away, the disciples parting before her as if she were a rabid animal. Her words were so familiar it stung.

"I was the one who asked her to fight me," explained Shen Jiu calmly.

Jiang Fengmian turned to face him, his eyes wide. "Why would you do that?"

"I had my reasons. We need to talk, but not right now. Could you meet me at your office in an hour? I need to do something first."

He looked in the direction Yu Ziyuan had left. It was high time the two of them had a talk.

"But what are you going to…"

"Fengmian," said Shen Jiu firmly. "Believe me, I know what I'm doing."

"Alright. But please be careful." He reached out to Shen Jiu's face, but stopped before making contact. "I will just…"

"I know," said Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian knew better than to touch him without reason.

A warm hand touched his cheek, sending spiritual energy to heal his wound. Despite their likeness in appearance and attitude, Jiang Fengmian's spiritual energy felt nothing like Yue Qingyuan.

Shen Jiu felt the wound close. He would have to use a healing balm on it so it wouldn't scar.

"Thank you," Shen Jiu said quietly before leaving. He couldn't remember whether he had ever thanked Jiang Fengmian before.

Despite living in Lotus Pier for three years, Shen Jiu had never been in Yu Ziyuan's part of the estate. It was quite orderly and tasteful, though the wide-eyed servants who squeaked and gasped upon seeing him somewhat ruined the impression.

When Shen Jiu tried to enter Yu Ziyuan's personal quarters, her two maids crossed his path.

"You aren't welcome here," said the two at the same time. Shen Jiu wondered whether they had practiced.

"Tell your mistress that we have to talk."

The maids exchanged glances and one of them went to speak to Yu Ziyuan while the other drilled holes in Shen Jiu with her eyes. He sighed.

"My lady gracefully agreed to hear you out," said the disgruntled maid when she returned. As Shen Jiu went past them, the maids didn't follow, so Yu Ziyuan must have told them to stay behind.

As he entered the room, he noted the broken vase on the floor with some twisted amusement. The two of them did have a lot in common, didn't they?

"What do you want?" asked Yu Ziyuan, massaging her right wrist. The paralysis must have started to unravel.

"To talk."

"What do we have to talk about?"

"I am leaving Lotus Pier tomorrow," said Shen Jiu. Yu Ziyuan was visibly startled.

"Why would you?"

"I should have left a long time ago, but I did not want to leave myself vulnerable. Now I have a golden core, and the children have enough training to survive as rogue cultivators," said Shen Jiu honestly.

"So you got all you needed from Jiang Fengmian, and now you are going to abandon him!" spat Yu Ziyuan bitterly.

Shen Jiu was not in the mood to entertain that. "I am doing it for your sake. Have the decency to be grateful."

Yu Ziyuan crossed her arms. "Why would you care? I made your life hell for years, and now you want me to believe that you want to do me a favor just because?"

Shen Jiu snorted. "Believe me, you have no idea what hell is like. At best you made my life mildly inconvenient."

Being a woman, Yu Ziyuan inevitably knew a bit about hardship, but a spoiled little lady like her could never imagine the kind of life Shen Jiu had to lead and what kind of monsters he had to tolerate. Compared to the likes of them, her efforts were laughable.

Yu Ziyuan looked almost offended by his reaction. "At the end of our duel… You held back, didn't you? Why?"

Shen Jiu sighed. That was difficult to admit, but he had no other explanation than the truth. "For a moment there… you reminded me of myself."

"So you pitied me!"

"I didn't want you to become a joke! It wouldn't be pleasant to be publicly beaten by a whore, would it?" Shen Jiu was beginning to get irritated. Speaking to Yu Ziyuan felt like he was repeatedly bashing a wall with his head, trying to make a dent.

"They don’t know that you used to be a… prostitute."

"Not for the lack of trying on your part."

His exact identity somehow managed to stay a secret, but there were definitely whispers of some sort of scandalous past. Luckily people had some misconceptions about brothel workers, so at worst they thought him to be a former concubine.

"I paid people to spread around misdirecting rumors," said Yu Ziyuan defensively.

"The least you could do, considering I am still known as your children’s former teacher. Were you the one who made up the rumor about me being a spirit of poetry?"

"The stupid ones get spread faster," said Yu Ziyuan defensively .

"You could at least be more creative. It’s literally in my name[1]."

Yu Ziyuan seemed amused for a second, then she remembered herself and glared at him suspiciously, "Do you love Jiang Fengmian?"

"He is like a dull-witted younger brother I never wanted. I don’t know what you find attractive about him."

Yu Ziyuan sputtered, her face red, "We aren’t talking about me! And he sure is in love with you, so…"

"He is not in love with me," cut off Shen Jiu. "He was lonely and he wanted a friend. That’s all he ever needed from me."

"He was lonely? He had me!"

"Did he now? Do you even remember the last time you talked to him before I came to Lotus Pier? And I mean really talked and listened to each other, not the thing you do where you scream at him and throw around tea cups."

Yu Ziyuan opened her mouth and then closed it, looking aside like a chided child.

"You know, I always suspected that he started sparring with me because he missed sparring with you. Why did you ever stop?" asked Shen Jiu.

"He never asked. I’ve already given him all he needed from this marriage, his heir, so I didn’t want to force him to spend time with me. It’s clear as day he doesn’t want to."

Shen Jiu’s heart twisted and he looked away. This was getting too uncomfortable.

"After I leave, try talking to him. You might be surprised."

"So it wasn’t a ruse. You are actually leaving?" asked Yu Ziyuan.

"Yes. Consider it a show of good faith, but…" He looked Yu Ziyuan in the eyes as he said that. "Try hurting my children again, and I'm going to show you what hell is like."

Shen Jiu strode out, passing still-suspicious maids on his way. He felt almost lighter, as if he got rid of some burden he had been carrying for years. Even the thought of explaining his decision to Jiang Fengmian didn't dim his mood.

[Congratulations User! You have reached your goal of 5000 Lore points!]

"Didn't I tell you to stay quiet? Now is not the time," thought Shen Jiu. He had waited three years. He could wait until he wasn't busy.

Jiang Fengmian looked relieved when Shen Jiu came into his office.

Idiot.

"I spoke to your wife. You can say we made peace with each other."

"That's wonderful!" If Jiang Fengmian was a dog, his tail would wiggle.

"I am leaving tomorrow morning. And I am taking Yue Yao and Wei Ying with me, so they would no longer be affiliated with your sect."

Jiang Fengmian's smile turned into a worried frown. "What are you… Did Yu Ziyuan threaten you? I can…"

"This was entirely my decision. Yu Ziyuan has nothing to do with it."

"But why would you leave? Is it because of the rumors? I will punish anyone who…"

Shen Jiu sighed. He knew that was going to be difficult.

"Fengmian, you know that my presence is hurting the sect. There won't be peace until I am gone, it's the only way."

Jiang Fengmian gasped in indignation. "What are you talking about? Your advice has been helping the sect for years! I don't know what I would even do without you."

"Your wife would give you the same advice if you talked to her. She does have some sense even if she makes it look like she doesn't."

Perhaps together those two could make a semi-functional Sect Leader. Shen Jiu didn't actually care that much. Once he was gone they could set Lotus Pier on fire for all he cared.

"If it's because of Yu Ziyuan, we can think of something!" said Jiang Fengmian desperately. "I could arrange it so you two wouldn't have to see each other!"

"Don't make it harder than it needs to be. I made my decision long ago."

Jiang Fengmian sighed and lowered his head in defeat. "You are just like your brother. I don't want to make you stay, but I am… I will miss you, that's all."

"You can always write and… perhaps we could visit in a couple of years. Once things are less tense."

"Things were already tense before you even came to Lotus Pier," said Jiang Fengmian gloomily. "I don't know what she wants from me… No matter what I do I am always in the wrong."

"I think it's rather obvious what she wants from you," scoffed Shen Jiu. How stupid could that man be?

"Yes, yes, she wants me to be a proper sect leader and I am… myself."

"Stop the self-pitying, it's embarrassing to watch!" barked Shen Jiu. "And she wants you to love her. I thought it was obvious."

"Why would she want that?" Jiang Fengmian looked honestly baffled.

"Because she is in love with you?"

"No, she isn't."

"I think it's clear that she is."

"Our marriage was arranged by her parents. She didn't choose it, and she always made it known that she did not like being married to me."

"Then explain, why does she care so much about you being in love with someone else? For someone who does not care she asked me too many questions about my feelings and your feelings. She even got angry at me on your behalf, because she thought I was using your feelings for personal gain."

He kind of was doing it, partially. He wasn't going to feel guilty about it. The Jiangs had resources to spare anyway.

Jiang Fengmian still didn't seem convinced. "But she never said anything..."

"Why would she?"

"I don't know. I don't know what to think…"

He could think about it without Shen Jiu's input. Probably. "I need to break the news to the children. Will you see us off tomorrow?"

"Of course," said Jiang Fengmian. He was so deep in thought, he didn't seem to register Shen Jiu leaving the room.

Shen Jiu was exhausted by the time he returned to Quiet Lotus Pavilion.

"Pack your things. We are leaving tomorrow," he said as he walked past the children. He wished to go to his room and finally speak to the System, but apparently his instructions weren't clear enough.

"Is this my fault, Shizun?" asked Wei Ying, grasping at Shen Jiu's sleeve. Sticky brat. "I am so sorry."

"It is all Yu Ziyuan's fault. She was just waiting for an excuse. Though I do wonder what you did to piss her off," said Shen Jiu.

"He just spoke back to her," said Meng Yao. Judging by Wei Ying's face that was a lie, not that Shen Jiu cared all that much. It didn't matter what stupid thing the brat did, although…

"What happened to your face?" asked Shen Jiu, inspecting the purple bruise on Wei Ying's chin. "Did Yu Ziyuan do that?"

If he noticed that before, he would make sure to punch the woman in the face.

"No, it was a hunting incident," said Wei Ying.

"Be better. What kind of cultivator walks around with a bruised face?" grumbled Shen Jiu. "I'm going to my room and I do not want to be disturbed unless it is an emergency."

He took a step towards his room.

"Mother, wait," called Meng Yao. As Shen Jiu turned to glare at him, the boy handed him a small white jar. "It's a healing paste for your wound."

That boy was like a mother hen sometimes. Little busybody.

"You should probably break the news to your friends," said Shen Jiu as he took the jar.

This time, when he went to his room, nobody tried to stop him.

"System. I want answers. Now," he thought.

[Do you want to purchase the Ultimate Secret of This World's Nature for 5000 Lore points?]

He almost poked a hole through the "accept".

[The world User currently resides in is the Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation. Its author, one of the User's acquaintances, used him and his peers as the source of inspiration. The similarities User had noticed simply reflect that.]

So some bastard looked at him and Yue Qingyuan and wrote… the cursed mess of Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian's relationship? Who was the bastard who dared to write that?! Shen Jiu wanted to have words with them!

A hateful, bitter woman pining for a husband who was shackled to her by duty… Was that how people saw their relationship? Was it how people saw him!? He couldn't have been that

transparent, could he?

Shen Jiu was beginning to get a headache. He eased out a silver hair pin from his hair. It had a crane-like design and was a bit gaudy, but he bought it on a whim, because it reminded him of the one he had owned in his previous life. It had been a gift from…

He threw the hairpin and it stabbed into the dressing screen like a knife.

How many people had been laughing at him behind his back in his previous life? It must have been so hilarious to watch him make a fool of himself! Giving moon eyes to the traitor, chained down like a loyal dog, still hoping to get an answer why.

He freed the rest of his hair, tugging at it painfully. At this point, he welcomed the pain.

[If User wants to know why, he can purchase the information for 5000 Lore points.]

"What?" said Shen Jiu out loud.

[The reason why Yue Qingyuan, also known as Yue Qi, did not come to save the User can be purchased for 5000 Lore points.]

"You are telling me the answer now. Or I swear I will find a way to kill you!"

[User cannot do anything to harm the System]

"I am not grinding to get another 5000 Lore points after that lackluster answer! The author knew me in real life, great, that's absolutely useless!"

[User's complaint is noted. This System can offer a 50% discount on the next purchase as an apology.]

"I will agree only to a thousand."

[2500 is the last offer.]

"How am I supposed to get that many on the road? It's not like I'll have company other than the children."

[2500]

"A thousand five hundred!"

[2500]

"Two thousand. That's my final offer."

[Agreed. 2000 it is.]

"When did you learn how to haggle anyway?"

[This System joined a professional development course. User's feedback is welcome!]

"Just shut up already!"

He changed into his sleep clothes and lay down, but his head was too full of thoughts to fall asleep properly.

He woke up from his restless sleep with the first rays of the sun. When it came to packing, he didn't have to do much: most of his possessions had been packed more than a month ago when he had gotten his golden core, back when things had seemed peaceful. He had decided to stay longer, though now he wasn't sure whether it was a mistake.

As he finished putting away some knick-knacks that were still running around, he pulled his hair pin out of the dressing screen and put it away for safekeeping. It was too fancy for the road.

When he went out to make sure the children were awake, he was wearing practical black robes. Rogue cultivators had no use for his usual finery. To his surprise, the children were already dressed and waiting for him.

"Let's go," he said and they followed him to the main gate. Jiang Fengmian and his children were already waiting for them.

"Are you sure you cannot stay?" asked Jiang Fengmian.

"Yes."

"Then you will need this," he said, giving Shen Jiu a heavy money pouch.

He rolled his eyes. "You know I survived perfectly well without your help."

He still took the money, because he wasn't stupid. Feeding and dressing two growing brats could be expensive, and they would also need talismans and other cultivation tools.

He could see the children talk quietly among themselves. All of them seemed to be crying already.

"I also wanted you to have this," said Jiang Fengmian, handing him a silk fan. That was an appropriate parting gift[2], so Shen Jiu took it, opening the fan to see the design. When he saw what it was, he laughed.

"A maple tree[3]? Really?"

"I thought it would remind you about me," said Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu admired the vibrant red of the maple leaves. An autumn fan. At least it wasn't a fan abandoned in autumn like him.[4].

"You are ridiculous. There is no way I will forget someone as ridiculous as you."

Jiang Fengmian smiled at that.

"Shizun," called Jiang Yanli. "We also have a gift for you."

"Thank you for teaching us," said Jiang Cheng shyly, handing him a paper fan. Shen Jiu took it, surprised. He didn't expect those two to care about him leaving enough to prepare a gift, especially on such short notice.

It was a paper fan, obviously hand-made though the work wasn't shoddy. As he opened it he saw purple lotuses. He could see that the ones in a lighter shade were painted by Jiang Yanli, while the darker ones had to be Jiang Cheng's work.

"Your technique has improved," he said and nodded at them approvingly.

"If you ever need help, know that you can ask me," said Jiang Fengmian after they said their final goodbyes.

"I will," said Shen Jiu. He would rather die than ask for help, but Jiang Fengmian didn't need to know that.

***

In their sixteen years of marriage Jiang Fengmian had never visited his wife's quarters. She needed her own space, so it seemed fair not to invade it. So he allowed Yu Ziyuan her space, allowed her to hire her own servants, who only answered to her, allowed her to leave whenever and wherever she wanted… That made talking to her more complicated than it already was.

"My lady is not prepared for guests," said Yinzhu bravely. His wife chose good servants. Jiang Fengmian wished his personal servants were that loyal.

"I am afraid this is urgent. I can give her time to prepare, but I need to talk to her today."

He waited patiently until Jinzhu spoke to Yu Ziyuan, and then until Yu Ziyuan was prepared to greet him. His wife never had to go into such trouble just to speak to him. She would just come to him whenever she wanted and start shouting and accusing and… Jiang Fengmian took a deep breath. He needed to stay calm for this conversation.

When he was finally allowed inside, his wife was waiting for him in her office, drinking tea calmly. Her demeanour made it feel like he was intruding, and Jiang Fengmian felt wrong-footed.

"What was it that demanded my urgent attention? Do you want to chide me for driving away your paramour?" said Yu Ziyuan. The venom must have tasted bitter in her mouth, because she washed it down with tea.

She did not offer him a cup, and he did not ask for one, but he sat down in front of her so they would be on the same level as he spoke.

"She is not my paramour. She is my friend."

"Like Cangse Sanren was your friend?"

"Exactly like that," said Jiang Fengmian calmly. She had been his friend, though her charms weren't lost on him. Cangse Sanren was a charming spitfire and one of the most capable cultivators he had ever met, but whatever attraction Jiang Fengmian felt towards her could never compare to Wei Changze's moon-eyed devotion.

He knew he lost Changze the day his friend set his eyes on Cangse Sanren. Jiang Fengmian had never quite forgiven her for that, and he felt guilty about it.

He looked at Yu Ziyuan's sour face and remembered Shen Shi's words. Could love really be the source of the poison?

"Before she left, Shen Shi said something that made me rethink our marriage," started Jiang Fengmian, looking at his hands.

"Did she now?"

"She said that you love me," said Jiang Fengmian. He could hear disbelief color his words.

Yu Ziyuan was silent for too long, and as he finally looked at her, he saw red splotches on her face. Jiang Cheng blushed the same way when he was embarrassed about something.

"Is that so hard to believe?" Her voice was so quiet, he almost missed it.

Of course it was hard to believe! What even was there to love? Jiang Yanli and Jiang Cheng loved him, of course, but they were easily impressed children.

"I have always thought you disliked being forced to marry me," said Jiang Fengmian honestly.

"Forced?" scoffed Yu Ziyuan. "I told my father that you were the only man I would ever marry. He didn't approve, especially after the second rejection."

"That was my father's decision. I had no say," explained Jiang Fengmian.

"At least he was just strong enough to say no, unlike you."

"What are you talking about? Nobody forced me to do anything. After my father died I had to marry, so I chose you."

"You did?"

"Of course, if I knew you had feelings for me, I wouldn't…"

Yu Ziyuan clutched the tea cup so hard that Jiang Fengmian stopped talking, afraid that she was going to hurl it at him.

"Well, it's a good thing you didn't know then!" she said.

Jiang Fengmian winced at his poor wording.

"Of course A-Li and A-Cheng wouldn't exist if we didn't get married, so I could never regret it. But it had to be so hard for you…"

"I still would not marry anyone but you," scoffed Yu Ziyuan. "So keep your regrets to yourself."

"I just regret hurting you, don't you understand? I wasn't thinking of love when I was looking for a wife! I just wanted someone to support me. I wanted someone to stay by my side and help me lead."

"Then why did you choose me? I have always thought it was a political move."

"You are strong and not at all like me, so I thought you would be a good leader. And we got along well, so I thought we could be friends at least."

She was also the most beautiful woman he had ever seen and the only woman to defeat him in a duel, so he was a little star struck.

Yu Ziyuan fell silent, looking at him as if she was searching for falsehood. "So what now?" she asked.

"I thought we could spar," said Jiang Fengmian. "Of course, you don't have to if you are busy… and you just had a duel yesterday, you must be tired…"

"Quiet. I will spar with you," said Yu Ziyuan. Her face was covered in red blotches again. Jiang Fengmian was hit with a sudden wave of affection. It seemed that Shen Shi was right after all.

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[1] Shen Jiu's alias is Shěn Shī (沈诗), where Shen is a family name of no particular significance and Shi means poetry. The spirit of poetry from the rumors is Shī Shén (诗神) with the same Shi (poetry) as in the name and with Shen meaning "divine spirit". Shishen can also be roughly translated as "divine embodiment of poetry itself". return to text ↩

[2] In Chinese culture, gifting a fan (扇, shàn) carries the elegant and bittersweet symbolism of a farewell, as its name is a homophone for "to part" (散, sàn). return to text ↩

[3] Maple Tree (Fēng, like in Jiang Fengmian's name) is a classic poetic symbol of autumn, remembrance, and the passage of time. A symbolic gift for sure, though a bit on the nose so Shen Jiu laughed when he saw it. return to text ↩

[4] There are multiple levels of meaning here. First, the fan references his former name, Shen Qingqiu (沈清秋), as the character "Qiu" (秋) means "autumn."

Then Shen Jiu evokes the classical poetic metaphor of the "fan abandoned in autumn." In Chinese poetry it symbolizes something (or someone) used for its purpose during the "summer" of its utility, only to be cast aside when the season changes. Commonly it referred to an abandoned woman. No wonder Shen Jiu associates himself with it! return to text ↩

Chapter 20: Little beast.

Winter was, by far, Shen Jiu's least favorite season. With his cultivation level as high as it was now, there was no fear of not waking up in the morning after a particularly cold night, but the winter chill still felt like death's embrace. He had seen it happen to the street children who weren't lucky enough to have a good hiding place.

The winter in Kuizhou area was much milder than the winters of Shen Jiu's childhood. There was no snow and he doubted that anyone could actually freeze to death at night. Yet it had its own unique cruelty to it, the damp chill seeping through the layers of clothes to cling to the skin. The constant drizzles made everything wet, which made sleeping outside far too troublesome.

"That mist cloud over the mountain is so pretty!" said Wei Ying brightly. "It's like a painting."

Shen Jiu squinted at the mountain overlooking the city. On silk, he would have thought it to be picturesque, but it was hard to appreciate the scenery when the cold seemed to seep into his bones.

"Did you not have enough of misty mountains on our way here?" asked Shen Jiu.

"None of them were as pretty as this one!" said Wei Ying with determination. Shen Jiu took his word for it. He hadn't been paying attention.

They continued to walk along the street in silence, Shen Jiu making note of all the shops and stalls they passed. They needed to find somebody who sold sturdy winter robes. He had no desire to get stuck in some backwater town for weeks tending to a feverish child.

"I can run ahead and check from the other end of the street to save time," suggested Wei Ying. He was like a leashed hound, straining to be let loose to chase squirrels around.

Shen Jiu shook his head. "I'm not letting you go anywhere alone until you prove you can be trusted."

"But you let Yao-ge go on his own!"

"A-Yao did not get caught stealing a meat bun in the broad daylight like an amateur."

Shen Jiu had to bow and apologize to the market stall owner for that, so he was never going to allow Wei Ying to forget about it.

"I didn't want to steal it! I just forgot to pay. In Lotus Pier we just took things, and then Uncle Jiang paid for it… I think. Or maybe they just liked us so they let us take stuff for free?"

"I will have a talk with Jiang Fengmian about this. If he wanted to spoil you, he should have just given you money, at least then you would have known the prices."

Shen Jiu had been appalled to find out that the brat had no concept of money's worth. Wei Ying would hand over whatever outrageous sum was asked with a smile on his face, having no idea that it was five times the usual price. How did Shen Jiu end up raising a spoiled young master? He entirely blamed Jiang Fengmian for this.

"Does this mean we are going to visit Lotus Pier soon?" asked Wei Ying hopefully.

"No."

"But why? It's been ages since we left!" whined the boy.

"It's been three months. It's too early for us to return."

Shen Jiu winced at the memory of Lotus Pier. He enjoyed the anonymity of their travels and the lack of noisy servants taking note of his every step. More than that, the simple thought of facing Yu Ziyuan and Jiang Fengmian together after what he had learned made his stomach turn. Thinking about it still made him feel strangely exposed.

Undeterred, Wei Ying continued complaining. "We haven't been doing much night hunting anyway. The most exciting thing we saw was that fierce corpse last month, and it was falling apart on its own."

"It doesn't matter if the night hunting is boring. Do you think all night hunts are life and death battles?"

"I thought being a rogue cultivator would be more exciting…" grumbled Wei Ying.

"If you want to complain about something, talk to your brother. Where is he anyway? He should have returned by now," said Shen Jiu.

Meng Yao was supposed to go down to the river and check whether they sold winter clothes at the docks. Shen Jiu did not want to go up and down the stairs without any reason to. This city's layout already made him annoyed enough.

"I can go look for him!" offered Wei Ying brightly.

"So you can get yourself lost? I don't think so. We are going to look for him together."

It took them long enough to find Meng Yao that Shen Jiu began to feel genuine unease. That made him all the more furious when they finally found Meng Yao talking to a small street urchin. The child was clutching an empty bowl of soup in his grubby hand.

"What are you doing? I sent you to check the docks, not to feed the local strays!" barked Shen Jiu upon seeing this.

The street urchin stopped smiling as soon as he heard that and stepped back a bit so he would be partially covered by Meng Yao's back. That was not a recent orphan like Wei Ying. This child clearly belonged to the streets, Shen Jiu could tell from a single glance.

Meng Yao had the gall to smile at Shen Jiu as if he wasn't wasting his time with nonsense. "This is A-Yang. He was begging by the docks, and I offered to buy him a meal."

"I don't care what his name is! We are not rich enough to go around being charitable."

They were in fact rich enough to buy thousands of bowls of soup, but Shen Jiu wasn't going to allow it on principle. A single meal changed nothing. A meaningless stupid kindness… Something Yue Qingyuan would do.

The street brat glared at him with such venom from behind Meng Yao's back that Shen Jiu was almost impressed. He also noticed the urchin's left hand, which was wrapped in dirty rags as if he had injured it somehow. Though it could be a clever ploy to gain more pity when begging for money.

"You did buy me soup and take me in when I was on the streets," said Wei Ying. "You seemed very charitable to me then, Shizun."

"That was different," huffed Shen Jiu, but he could see he wasn't convincing anybody. He felt like explaining that he picked up Wei Ying from the streets to experiment on him would be in bad taste.

"A-Yang needs a doctor, Mother," said Meng Yao, looking at him pleadingly.

"How is it my concern?"

"Mother, please! I will repay you once I am old enough to night hunt on my own."

"Me too!" chimed in Wei Ying.

Trapped by two pairs of begging eyes and one full of loathing, Shen Jiu felt like he was the villain here. Did they want him to go around giving away their money to every beggar they met on the streets?

"Fine," he huffed. "Let's find him a doctor."

As they walked, Shen Jiu overheard Wei Ying ask the urchin about his hand.

"There is this one bastard that owes me pastries for an errand," hissed the urchin. "I got beaten up doing it, but he refused to pay up so I chased his cart. He hit me with a whip, and I fell, and… and the cart went right over my hand."

That story sounded familiar.

"That's awful!" gasped Wei Ying. "Why would somebody do that to a child?"

"Some people are just rotten," said Meng Yao. "I am sorry that happened to you, A-Yang."

A-Yang!

Xue Yang. From Kuizhou. Of course. Just his luck. At this rate, he expected to meet Wen Ruohan browsing the local collection of winter clothes. Why not!

Shen Jiu stopped walking, frozen by the realisation that he had allowed a viper inside his nest. He needed to take this little beast away before he could sink his fangs in…

"Mother? What's wrong?" asked Meng Yao with concern.

There was no rational way to explain the truth to the children, so he had to be subtle. He would pay the doctor to do what was needed and leave this city forever. With any luck Xue Yang would forget about their existence soon.

"I am just trying to remember where we saw the clinic's sign board," lied Shen Jiu.

"It's right down there. The first turn right. The owner's a rotten miser," said Xue Yang.

"You know him?" asked Wei Ying curiously.

"I begged him for help after the cart crushed my hand. He said he didn't work for free."

Shen Jiu could not find holes in the doctor's logic. Why waste resources on a street child who could easily die of infection or starvation a few months down the line? The boy likely survived because of his dormant cultivation talent, the talent that allowed him to grow up into somebody who could massacre an entire clan in one night.

"Doctor Dai's Clinic" said the white characters on the black signboard by the door of the unremarkable building near the shopping district. Shen Jiu could smell the herbs even before he opened the door.

The clinic didn't look much like Qian Cao Peak. It looked more like an office with a big table and a rat-like old man scribbling something on a piece of paper. His eyes widened as he saw them.

"Honored cultivator, how may this humble doctor help you?" he asked in a sycophantic way that reminded Shen Jiu of Shang Qinghua.

"Heal that urchin. I will pay for him," said Shen Jiu.

He didn't miss the flash of disgust on the doctor's face when he glanced at the boy. Was he afraid of dirtying his hands? He had chosen the wrong profession then.

"Of course! Please sit on the bench, while I examine the boy. I will need to unwrap this first."

"No! Just give me medicine!" shouted Xue Yang as the doctor tried to touch his hurt hand. "It hurts worse if you touch it!"

"I cannot help if you don't allow me to examine the injury," said the doctor with slight irritation in his voice.

"I don't care!" shouted Xue Yang. "Don't touch me."

Shen Jiu had enough of this. In two quick steps, he came close enough to grab the boy by the upper arms, restraining him. The urchin tried to free himself, but no matter how much he thrashed, a skinny boy no older than seven could do little against a cultivator with a golden core.

"You can start the examination," said Shen Jiu.

"Let me go, you lying hag! I shouldn't have come with you! You cultivators are all dirty snakes!" screamed Xue Yang. Shen Jiu idly considered gagging him.

"It is a testament to your boundless compassion, Madam, that you are willing to help even this wretched thing," said the doctor.

"Work quietly. You aren't going to be paid more for flattery," said Shen Jiu.

"It's going to be fine, A-Yang," encouraged Meng Yao gently. "It can hurt more now, but after the treatment is over it will be much better."

The little beast just screamed profanities. Then, as the doctor began to unwrap the wound, the pained sobs wrenched themselves out of the beast's chest.

It was a long examination, despite the fact that it lasted less than a quarter of an hour.

"It is as I feared," said the doctor after he finished examining the hand. "The bones have started to knit together poorly so it hurts him to move his hand. What remains of the little finger began to blacken. I wonder how he got rid of it."

"It was hanging by some skin. I bit it off," said the child, his voice hoarse. He calmed down once the doctor stopped touching him, but Shen Jiu did not let him go.

The doctor paled. For a man who must have performed his share of amputations, he seemed too disturbed.

"I will need to cut the remains off, lest he lose the entire hand to this rot," said the doctor. He seemed determined to ignore the child, and speak only to Shen Jiu.

"Is there anything else that can be done?" asked Meng Yao.

"Of course, I could break the bones again and wrap the hand so it would heal correctly this time, but the recovery will be long and with the kind of lifestyle he leads, I don't see much use in causing the child more pain if he will end up in the same place."

Shen Jiu looked down at the glaring brat, who sputtered at the doctor, "Stay away from my hand! I don't need help from a hack like you anyway."

"Do you have something to put him to sleep?" asked Shen Jiu. Xue Yang screamed in indignation and began struggling anew. It would be much easier to send him on his way, but Shen Jiu didn't like to stop halfway.

"I have special wine for that purpose, but it's quite expensive. And… with the child malnourished as he is, there is a small chance he won't wake up after. It's safer and easier simply to tie him down. I have leather belts for that purpose."

"Bring the wine," said Shen Jiu. As he said that, the little beast twisted in his hold and bit into his arm, making Shen Jiu hiss.

"This is disgusting!" he said, trying to dislodge the child without letting him go.

"A-Yang, please, we are trying to help you!" pleaded Meng Yao. "You won't even feel the pain."

"But what if he doesn't wake up? I think he should have a choice about what happens next," said Wei Ying.

"His cultivation will keep him alive. I am certain of it," lied Shen Jiu through his teeth. The beast bit like a street mutt.

Xue Yang did not seem influenced by their words whatsoever.

"Get him off me! Don't let him run. You!" he addressed the doctor. "Prepare the wine, I am going to pour it down his throat myself."

"I have a client scheduled soon," started the doctor. "Perhaps you could…"

"Do I look like I care about your appointments?" Shen Jiu's glare was enough to make the man scramble to his back room. While he did that, Meng Yao and Wei Ying managed to make Xue Yang let go of Shen Jiu's arm. The silk of his travelling robes was surprisingly sturdy, though he would still have a terrible bruise after that.

"Here is the wine," squeaked the doctor, handing Shen Jiu a cup.

He took the boy by the face and pried his jaw open, ignoring the sharp teeth that attempted to bite him. Then he poured the wine in Xue Yang's mouth, making the little beast choke on it. The red liquid partially got out of his mouth, staining his face.

"I am going to kill you! You are all dead!" screamed the little beast, still trying to free himself though his struggles got gradually weaker as the wine took effect.

Numerous half-coherent screams later, he finally fell limp, making Meng Yao and Wei Ying support his weight.

"I am not sure we should be doing that if A-Yang doesn't want us to," said Wei Ying. "It feels wrong."

"Sometimes to be kind we have to be harsh. He will thank us later," said Meng Yao serenely.

Shen Jiu didn't say anything. As he looked at the prone form of the little beast he wished for him to never wake up. The children would be upset, but Shen Jiu could frame it as a mercy in disguise, the end of poor little street brat's suffering.

Unfortunately, luck was never on his side. The little beast had no basic decency to die quietly and simplify things.

Xue Yang slept through the entire operation, through the doctor's stammering instructions, and through being carried to the local inn by Meng Yao and Wei Ying. Shen Jiu considered telling the boys to leave the little monster outside, but he couldn't risk the little viper taking revenge on him later. He was already involved so it was better to keep an eye on the threat.

Xue Yang began to stir close to supper, and the children saw fit to summon Shen Jiu to witness the groggy little beast stumbling around the room like a cornered animal. Xue Yang's demeanour changed as soon as he was promised food, and he proceeded to devour three portions of the supper before Meng Yao cut him off.

After supper the little beast became good-natured, though he still glanced at Shen Jiu warily from time to time. Wei Ying began to regale the brat with exaggerated stories of their night hunts, while Xue Yang listened with his mouth open and asked surprisingly insightful questions.

"We should keep him," said Meng Yao quietly but confidently. "His spiritual roots are strong. It would be a waste to leave him on the streets."

"Is that why you made me help the little beast?" asked Shen Jiu, watching Xue Yang warily. The little monster was laughing at something Wei Ying said.

"Not only that. He reminded me of A-Ying at first," said Meng Yao, smiling placidly. "Then I checked his spiritual roots, and thought that he would make a good disciple for you."

"Why would I want another disciple?" huffed Shen Jiu.

"You have a golden core, your own unique fighting style, a well of knowledge, and the support of one of the five Great Sects. That's enough to found your own sect. Recruiting the underprivileged talents like Wei Ying and Xue Yang, we could make something great. With time and effort you could rival Baoshan Sanren, I am sure of it."

Where the hell did that come from!? Shen Jiu couldn't believe the audacity of this child!

"I have no desire to lead a sect!" said Shen Jiu. "And I certainly have no need of another disciple, least of all a feral little beast like him."

"It's not like we can send him on his way until his hand is healed. That would be too cruel," said Meng Yao calmly. "We could use this time as a sort of a trial…"

"No," interrupted Shen Jiu. He would not let this little monster stay long enough for the children to get attached to him. "We will find another place for him…. I have heard that Baixue Temple takes in orphaned children and teaches them cultivation. We will take him there."

The way to Baixue Temple led through the mountains. If a seven-year-old boy perished on his way there, it would be just an unfortunate accident. Winter in the mountains was harsh

after all.

"Yes, Mother," said Meng Yao. His voice was smooth and his face obedient, but Shen Jiu noticed dissatisfaction in his eyes.

"Now it's time to wash the grime off the little beast," declared Shen Jiu and went to order a bath for them. As soon as he was forced to get into water, Xue Yang remembered that he was more animal than human, scratching and biting like a feral cat.

Later, when he was clean and placated by the herbs that dulled the pain in his hand, Xue Yang became good-natured again. This switching put Shen Jiu on guard.

The next morning, as they set out to buy supplies, Shen Jiu announced his official plan for Xue Yang's future. He had gotten so used to the little beast following them around like a half-tamed stray, that the refusal hit him like a brick to the face.

"I'm not stupid! I'm not going outside the city with you. I know how it works: you will trick me and make it so I sell myself and you get all the money," said Xue Yang, squinting at Shen Jiu suspiciously. He might have not looked much like an urchin in Wei Ying's old clothes, but the ruthless spirit of the streets could be heard in his every word.

Shen Jiu scoffed. "Who would buy a slave with a busted hand? Can you even swipe like that? Or wash something? You are useless."

"Mother, must you be so… hard on him?" whispered Meng Yao.

"That's why you fixed it! So I fetch you more money!" said Xue Yang as if it was some sort of revelation he just had.

"It would save me money just to find a street brat who didn't need fixing in the first place," said Shen Jiu. "It's not like you are the only one in the city."

"They are all ugly, though."

Shen Jiu sighed. "So are you."

"Take that back, you whore!" shrieked the little beast.

Before Shen Jiu could react, Wei Ying jumped to his defence, "Don't talk to Shizun like that! We are trying to help you!"

"I don't need your help!" screamed Xue Yang and stormed off.

For one serene moment, Shen Jiu thought about letting him go and leaving this awful town behind. The problem had solved itself, so why do anything? Then he remembered the heaps of bodies the child would leave behind him once he grew up. Xue Yang knew their names and faces now, and he was the type to hold a grudge.

"I will talk to him," Shen Jiu said. The children stared at him in silent disbelief.

"Are you sure, Mother?" asked Meng Yao cautiously. "You and A-Yang… don't seem to get along that well. I think it's better if I talk to him."

"I know the way he thinks. It will be faster if I do it. Just wait here for me," said Shen Jiu.

He went after the little beast, deliberately not catching up to him. Then, as the brat entered a narrow alley, Shen Jiu stopped. For a while, he stood there and listened as Xue Yang's furious pacing turned into sobs. He wasn't waiting for the child to calm down though, he was waiting for something else.

The streets didn't disappoint. The other strays came to circle their prey, and small and wounded Xue Yang was an easy one.

"Hey, Xiao Yang. Heard you made new friends. Wanna share?" asked an unfamiliar voice.

"Share what?" asked the little beast, his voice rough from crying.

"Don't play stupid! We saw you hang out with those cultivators! They even took you to the doctor… There is no way they didn't give you money!" said another voice.

"They are just creeps that wanted to sell me! They didn't give me shit!" screamed Xue Yang.

"Yes, and what's in your sleeve?" said the first voice.

"Give this back! I need these! My hand…" Xue Yang was cut off by what sounded like a shove.

Shen Jiu heard enough. He stepped into the alley.

An urchin, thin like a stick, but two heads taller than Xue Yang, was examining a packet of herbs that Shen Jiu had personally given to the little beast. "Looks expensive." His companion, broad-shouldered and dumb-faced, grunted in agreement, while Xue Yang tried to get out of his hold.

"Put it where you found it and scram," said Shen Jiu coldly. The street brats looked back at him, their eyes widening in horror. They dropped the package on the ground in their hurry to leave. Xue Yang immediately rushed to his medicine, clutching it to his chest with his only working hand.

"If you are done hiding like a coward," said Shen Jiu calmly, "I can take you to the temple. They will teach you how to make bastards like those two beg for mercy."

"Why do you want to take me there? Why did you help me at all? You don't like me! I can tell," said Xue Yang.

Shen Jiu let out a frustrated breath. The little beast wasn't wrong. "A-Yao and Wei Ying want to help you, so I will. It's as simple as that."

"People don't just help trash like me for no reason."

"Those two are different from the people you usually meet. If they can help, they will. That's just who they are."

Meng Yao, for all his cunning and ambition, got strange enjoyment out of meaningless charity. And Wei Ying was a full-fledged self-sacrificing idiot, just like… That was why Shen Jiu needed to get rid of Xue Yang as soon as he could. Those two were like a beacon for desperate leeches. Show a disgusting creature like Xue Yang even a shred of kindness and he will never let go, begging for more. Shen Jiu knew that well.

"I like them. But you are a real bitch," said Xue Yang, putting the herbs back in his sleeve.

"I just saved your miserable hide, little beast. Call me a bitch again, and I will kill you."

"Fuck you!" spat out Xue Yang as he went past Shen Jiu out of the alley. "I guess I got nothing better to do. I can check out that stupid temple of yours."

Chapter 21: The price of mercy.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shen Jiu was relieved to step on dry land again after days stuck on a boat with bored children. It was a nightmare he had no desire to ever repeat.

The little beast had never been on a boat before, so most of the journey he had been trying to throw himself overboard out of simple-minded curiosity. Shen Jiu, of course, advised Meng Yao to let the brat drown himself if he wished to do so. Yet, the stubborn boy still insisted on keeping the little monster from harm's way.

Luckily, they didn't have to waste much time at the port town. Not long after Shen Jiu started asking the food sellers about caravans going to Qinghe, an old man in a straw hat approached them.

"Can you actually use this sword, miss[1], or is it just for show?" asked the man bluntly.

"What use is it to you? If you doubt my skill, I could demonstrate, but I suspect you won't survive the experience," said Shen Jiu snidely.

"If you are as good with a sword as you are with words, I can take you to the beginning of Baixue mountain path myself. You just have to protect my cart if something happens."

This was too good an offer to refuse, even if the peasant's cart looked so old that Shen Jiu wouldn't be surprised if it fell apart midway.

"Do you have a lot of bandits on this road?" asked Shen Jiu. The peasant wasn't even transporting anything expensive, his cart loaded mostly with rice sacks.

"It's the only road that goes through the mountains and there are a lot of caravans heading to Qinghe from Yunmeng. The Nie Sect kills bandits on sight, so the bastards don't dare attack on their territory, but we are free game," complained the peasant.

"Which Sect is responsible for this territory?" asked Shen Jiu. Jiang Fengmian could be an idiot sometimes, but he would have dealt with this if it was his responsibility. So, it had to be a minor sect.

"Yueyang Chang," said the old man with startling disdain.

"This is the sect of that bastard Chang Ci'an!" bellowed the little beast, his voice cutting through the noise of the port town.

Shen Jiu winced at the little mongrel making a scene. He didn't want to draw too much attention to them, but if the brat acted like a crazed animal there was little to be done about it.

The old man laughed coarsely at the brat's audacity. "And how do you know the man, little one?"

"He is the bastard who crushed my hand! I'm going to kill him one day!" screamed Xue Yang shamelessly. People started to turn their heads to look at them.

"Is this why your hand is all wrapped up? Just like the Changs! Sorry excuses for cultivators they are! You know, there was a small village near mine. They got some trouble with a vicious fox yao. Asked Chang Sect for help, but the price was too much for the village to pay."

"Did the yao kill all the villagers?" asked Wei Ying.

"Not for the lack of trying. Most people just moved. But some old folks refused to leave their homes…"

"Perhaps we should set off while the sun is high," suggested Shen Jiu. He didn't want the old man to talk their ear off the whole day.

"You are right, it gets dark quicker now that it is winter. Let me just move some sacks so there is space for you to sit."

"Allow us to do it for you, Uncle[2]," said Meng Yao, walking to the cart. Wei Ying followed close behind, happy to do something.

The old man's eyebrows disappeared under his straw hat as he watched Shen Jiu's disciples move the heavy sacks around effortlessly. "It's like they don't feel the weight at all," he said with awe.

After the kids settled in the cart, Shen Jiu sat down on the cart's tailgate. He wanted a clean line of sight so he could jump into action if needed. Obviously, regular criminals would be easy for him to deal with. However, there was a real possibility of them being cultivators in disguise.

He once helped Yue Qingyuan deal with the particulars of a scheme like that. A minor sect too incompetent to deal with the "bandits", who were, in fact, the disciples of the sect in question wearing disguises. This way the sect had a constant flow of money from people hiring them to guard their caravans.

Shen Jiu would not put something like that beneath the Chang sect so he was listening carefully, ready to fight cultivators if needed.

Wei Ying and the cart driver seemed to take great joy in talking at each other, although Shen Jiu was pretty sure they were having two different conversations at the same time. Meanwhile, Meng Yao, for reasons known only to him, decided to teach Xue Yang about the five Great Sects. Ironically, the little beast seemed to dislike the Jin on principle.

The lull of people's voices didn't distract Shen Jiu from hearing a rustle in the bushes. He sent qi to his ears, making the sounds around him sharpen.

"But boss, they have children with them," whispered one of the bandits. He sounded young.

"That's good for us. Makes them an easier mark. If you are so concerned, Han Tao, you deal with the brats yourself. Now let's go."

Five peasants in mismatched armour jumped out of the bushes, circling them like a pack of wolves. The ox startled, halting the cart's movement. Shen Jiu sliced the throat of a man who tried to grab him. Too easy… Not a cultivator then. He blasted the second attacker with spiritual energy. The body slammed into a tree with too much force.

In one swift motion Shen Jiu jumped over the cart, landing in front of the old man and Wei Ying, who already took out his talismans. The two bandits took one look at his blood-covered sword and ran away.

At least they weren't stupid.

He turned to check on Meng Yao and Xue Yang and found them standing over a tied-up bandit. Xue Yang attempted to kick the man, but was stopped by Meng Yao's gentle tug. Shen Jiu's lips involuntarily twitched at the image as he suppressed an amused smile.

"Those bandits are such losers!" whined Wei Ying. "I wanted to try my new talisman, but they ran away before I could use it."

"Your new talisman is supposed to set things on fire," said Shen Jiu as he whipped the blood off his sword with a rag. "This cart is made of wood."

"It would only set the bandits on fire! At least it's supposed to."

"You cultivators are insane," said the old man. "What are we going to do with this one?"

"Let's kill him!" said Xue Yang eagerly. Shen Jiu hated to agree with him, but it did seem like the best solution. If they let the bandits go, they would just rob somebody else. Also the blood from the bandit he had killed got into his hair, and it would be a long time until he had an opportunity to wash it out properly.

"Any last words?" asked Shen Jiu idly. He still wasn't sure he wanted to kill the bandits, but he wanted to see the man beg.

"Wait, please!" Shen Jiu recognised the voice. It was the one who didn't want to hurt the kids. Curse him for making things complicated.

"His heart didn't seem to be in it when he attacked us," said Meng Yao. "He hesitated as soon as he saw A-Yang, and I used his distraction to immobilise him."

"Those bandits wouldn't take pity on us," said the old man. "Rotten lot."

"I'm sorry!" said the bandit. He seemed to be on the verge of crying. Shen Jiu took a longer look at the criminal's face. The man was barely out of boyhood.

"Your name is Han Tao, right?" asked Shen Jiu, putting away his sword.

The bandit looked at him as if he was some sort of celestial being. "How do you… Yes, Miss."

"What brought you to this path? You don't seem to have the right disposition for it."

Wu Yanzi would have eaten this man alive. Shen Jiu always did his best to conceal any signs of having a conscience, lest his master decide that he was more of a burden than an asset and disposed of him.

"My parents died three years ago, and as the eldest I had to take care of my younger siblings. I have three of them. We managed, but then A-Mao got ill and the medicine… I just wanted a quick way to get some money!"

The tears were now streaming down the young man's face. It was disgusting. And likely fake. Shen Jiu also knew how to put on a pitiful act and cry his eyes out if he needed to. This man could be an only child for all he knew.

Shen Jiu took out his knife and cut the rope. It was a good one. What a waste.

"If you know what's good for you, you will change your path while it is not too late," said Shen Jiu. "Take care of those two. One of them might still be alive."

"Make sure the dead one gets a proper burial, or he will come back," said Wei Ying brightly. Shen Jiu huffed in amusement.

"And tell the other bandits that this road is under protection," said Shen Jiu loftily. It wouldn't work for long, but it could save some people from being robbed.

"Of course, Miss! Thank you for sparing this worthless one's life!" said the bandit as he fell into a kowtow before Shen Jiu's feet.

Shen Jiu took the money bag out of his sleeve. He didn't know whether it would change anything for the boy's younger brother, but… There was one winter when Yue Qi got so ill he was too weak to even eat. Shen Jiu, having more desperation than sense, almost got himself beaten up trying to rob an apothecary…

The handful of silver rained on the bandit's head as Shen Jiu unclenched his fist. Han Tao looked up at Shen Jiu, uncomprehending.

"This is payment for delivering my message. Buy your brother some medicine," said Shen Jiu as he turned to the cart driver. "Let's go. We have wasted enough time on this."

"You know he could be lying to you," said the old man, not impressed.

"He is not," said Shen Jiu.

"A real bleeding heart you are," scoffed the old man as he went to check on his ox before setting off.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you," said the bandit as a mantra. His tears did not stop as he picked up the silver from the ground.

“Good luck, Han Tao!” said Wei Ying before returning to his place in the cart.

"Thank you, Mother," said Meng Yao quietly. His eyes shone with warmth and pride. Shen Jiu turned away, scowling at the dead body still lying on the road.

"What are you thanking me for? It was not my money anyway," he said.

It could be the money he stole from the Madam, or the money Jiang Fengmian gave him, but it certainly wasn’t his money.

"You are stupid to believe him. People will say whatever to get some pity," said the little beast, eyeing a piece of silver on the ground greedily.

"Your face is stupid," huffed Shen Jiu.

When they reached the road leading to the Baixue Temple, it was late in the day. The lulling sun shone on them through the tall pines, which covered the base of the mountain.

"You sure you want to set off this close to nighttime?" asked the old man. "It will take you days to get there on foot. My village is not far from here, you could stay the night. It’s not much but beats sleeping outside."

Shen Jiu did not trust the man’s charity. "We will manage. You can leave now."

"Thank you for taking us here, Uncle," said Meng Yao, bowing politely. Judging by the old man’s face he found it more unnerving than Shen Jiu’s rudeness.

"We had a deal, didn’t we?" said the old man, scratching the back of his head. "Take care, I guess."

Shen Jiu started walking up the mountain path immediately but stopped as soon as he realised that he could only see two children. Wei Ying had lagged behind, gleefully waving at the retreating cart.

"Wei Ying, stop fooling around!" he shouted.

"I was just saying goodbye!" shouted Wei Ying back, still not bothering to start actually walking.

"If you don’t get moving, I’ll leave you here for the wolves to eat!"

Wei Ying ran to catch up with them with a grin, "I can take them. Hey, Yao-ge, do you think my new talisman would work against wolves?"

"Obviously, most animals are scared of fire. But as far as I know there are no wolves in this region. The biggest predator that inhabits this mountain is a fox."

"A fox? I don’t want to set a fox on fire! They’re cute."

"I can set it on fire for you if you show me how to do it," offered Xue Yang. He almost sounded polite about it.

Shen Jiu had no idea what was wrong with these children. Why couldn’t they just walk without saying the most inane things he had ever heard?

As the old man had said, they couldn’t cover much distance before the blush of the sunset stained the sky, signalling that they had to make camp before it got too dark. Shen Jiu chose the best place he could find for it.

There was a large rock that would protect them from the wind, and a spring not too far away so they would be able to replenish their water supply in the morning. Sensing the calm natural qi of the place, Shen Jiu sat down to meditate, leaving the children to make a fire and construct a lean-to that would protect them from rain.

The sound of a nearby explosion tore Shen Jiu out of his meditation. A piece of wood flew through the air, close enough for him to feel its passage. It would have hit him, if he hadn’t flinched on instinct after hearing an unexpected loud sound.

"Wei Ying!" he shouted, lunging to his feet. "Are you mentally challenged? If so, I should have left you at Lotus Pier!"

"I didn’t know it would blow up like this," said the boy, his face covered in soot. The remains of the bonfire he had been trying to set were actually on fire. So was his left sleeve.

Meng Yao poured the water on his brother’s arm before the idiotic brat could even notice the fire. "A-Ying, we talked about it. There is time and place for experiments. You could have hurt someone!" he chided.

Wei Ying bowed his head in shame. "Sorry, Yao-ge!"

For some reason being chided by Meng Yao seemed to have more effect on the brat than being screamed at by Shen Jiu. It was profoundly annoying.

"Go to the spring to bring new water!" barked Shen Jiu, trying to take his leadership back. "And clean your damn face!"

"At least Ying-ge was doing something useful," said the little beast. Shen Jiu turned to face him sharply. The brat was sitting on the ground and drawing something in the dust with a stick. It looked like characters for his name.

"What did you just say?" hissed Shen Jiu.

"You just let Ying-ge and Yao-ge do all the work, while you sit around doing nothing," said Xue Yang, looking up at him with disdainful eyes. Shen Jiu stepped forward. With the setting sun behind his back, his shadow engulfed the little beast completely.

"Mother, perhaps you could make sure that A-Ying doesn't get distracted on his way to his spring?" said Meng Yao gently, moving in front of the beast to obstruct Shen Jiu's line of vision.

He took a deep breath. Whatever he wanted to do to the little monster wasn't something he wanted Meng Yao to see. The boy had a high opinion of him for some reason, and Shen Jiu didn't want to change that.

"Fine," he said through his teeth.

As he walked away from the cliff, the trees became more abundant. Shen Jiu deliberately crushed several tree-branches under his feet as he walked over them. This together with the walk allowed him to cool off enough that he was for the most part not murderous by the time he reached the spring.

Wei Ying was balancing precariously on a single stone in the spring, trying to reach for something.

"What are you doing?" asked Shen Jiu.

Startled by his appearance, the boy lost his balance and would have fallen in the freezing water if Shen Jiu hadn't caught him by his arm. As soon as Wei Ying caught his balance, Shen Jiu jerked him by the arm, forcing the boy to jump back to the solid ground.

"Thanks for the catch, Shizun! I found a nugget of jade, but my arms are too short to get it."

Shen Jiu gave a searching look to the spring to see what Wei Ying was talking about. There was, in fact, a piece of white jade lying there in the spring, so bright it could be seen even in the twilight.

Sending a burst of qi to the jade, Shen Jiu manoeuvred it to fly onto his open palm gracefully. Then he handed the stone to Wei Ying, satisfied to see his wide-eyed awe.

"That was amazing! I didn't know you could do that! Will you teach me?" the boy bombarded him immediately.

"Once you stop blowing things up, perhaps," said Shen Jiu, amused by the eagerness. Wei Ying always had such high energy, it was almost endearing. Like a puppy chasing his own tail.

"But Shizun!" whined Wei Ying.

"Wash your face again. I can see the soot behind your ear."

"Did you come here to check how well I cleaned myself? I am not a baby anymore," complained Wei Ying after washing his face.

"I just took the chance to escape more annoying company," said Shen Jiu.

Wei Ying frowned, "Did you and A-Yang butt heads again? I can't understand why you two dislike each other so much."

"I know his kind. This is the kind of scum you should keep away from," said Shen Jiu, glaring at his muddled reflection in the running water.

"But… he is just a kid. Like I was when you found me," said Wei Ying. It was strange to hear him speak so seriously.

"He is nothing like you! This kind of gutter rats know no gratitude, no mercy, no basic decency. Even if by some twist of fate you gain his loyalty, you will soon regret it. Do you want to go around apologising to the people he hurts and protecting him from the consequences of his own actions?"

Yue Qingyuan must have regretted ever meeting him by the end of it. Shen Jiu brought him nothing but strife.

"A-Yang can learn! We can just teach him what's wrong and what's right. It's not that difficult!"

How naive! As expected from Wei Ying. That's why Shen Jiu had to take control of the situation before it became too dangerous.

"You might tame a beast, but it will still be a beast at its core," said Shen Jiu quietly. "Let's go. A-Yao must be wondering whether we got lost."

The rest of the night was quiet. The children fell asleep as soon as they had eaten, and Shen Jiu was left alone to watch over them. With the golden core he didn't need to sleep every day, and frankly he did not want to even attempt to while Xue Yang was nearby.

The little beast might have looked peaceful while he slumbered, but Shen Jiu didn't trust it for a second.

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[1] Miss (姑娘 / Gūniang) is a common and respectful form of address for a young, unmarried woman in Chinese culture. It's polite to call any young woman Miss unless you know for a fact she is married. return to text ↩

[2] Uncle (大叔 / Dàshū) is a standard, polite way for a young person to address an older male stranger in Chinese culture. return to text ↩

Chapter End Notes

The next chapter is coming sooner than usual! I ended up splitting one chapter in two for better pacing. Now it's just down to editing, so it should be ready in a few days!

Chapter 22: The moon-eyed fox.

It was possible that Shen Jiu significantly underestimated the pace of a seven-year-old child. It took a few hours for Shen Jiu to get tired of walking slowly. Then he got the idea of an endurance training regime: Meng Yao and Wei Ying could take turns carrying the little beast, sparing Shen Jiu from more irritation.

The little monster didn't like to be carried, claiming that unlike his hand his feet hadn't been crushed. Shen Jiu left it to Meng Yao and Wei Ying to persuade him. If he got involved in the argument, he would have thrown Xue Yang off the mountain.

The new arrangement worked perfectly for half a day. Then they reached the part of the mountain covered in snow and the children began to struggle. They had to do twice the work: reinforce their bodies with qi to carry the extra weight, and maintain a more delicate constant flow of qi to their feet to keep themselves from slipping.

Their pace became irritatingly slow again. Hungry and spiritually drained, the boys got slower and slower. That's why as soon as they reached a convenient clearing, Shen Jiu called for a break.

The clearing served their needs. Rhododendron thickets covered the entire upper part of the mountain, so stopping anywhere else would be irritating. There was also a broad, flat slab of sandstone, just the right height to sit on. However, they had to clean off the snow first.

"This was harder than any endurance training we did at Lotus Pier," declared Wei Ying, throwing himself on the rock as if he was a young mistress tired of her dancing lessons.

"That's because we are going uphill," explained Meng Yao as he passed along the rations. His usually impeccable posture slipped into something less rigid and his hair was slightly disheveled.

Perhaps they could take more frequent breaks. The children didn't have their golden cores yet.

"You two should stop carrying me if it's so difficult," said Xue Yang in between bites of dry meat.

"You can stretch your feet a bit after we are done here, A-Yang," said Meng Yao. "But after that it's better we carry you, if we want to reach Baixue Temple by tomorrow evening."

"But you two are so tired already. Why doesn't Auntie Shen carry me?" asked Xue Yang innocently. Shen Jiu immediately saw it for the ploy it was.

"Who's your auntie?" scoffed Shen Jiu. "And I won't touch a filthy mongrel like you. You have legs, you can walk."

"You had no trouble touching me when you held me down at the clinic," said Xue Yang bitterly.

"Don’t even remind me! I had to throw out that robe after you stained it with slobber, you mutt," said Shen Jiu.

"Let’s not…" started Meng Yao.

"I didn’t ask you to torture me, you bitch! Be happy I didn’t bite anything off!"

"Torture? If it wasn’t for me, you would be a useless cripple for life!"

"Mother, please, don’t…"

"He started it," interrupted Shen Jiu. "Ungrateful little monster. I hope they know how to whip brats like that in shape in Baixue Temple. Someone like you needs a firm hand to keep you in your place."

The words tasted like blood and vomit in his mouth. Shen Jiu swallowed the bile.

"If they are anything like you, then I don’t want to go to this stupid temple at all!" screamed Xue Yang and began stomping away.

Meng Yao tried to stop him, but as he stood up in front of the path back, the brat took a sharp turn diving into the narrow gap in the roots of rhododendron thicket and disappearing from sight.

"A-Yang, wait!" called Meng Yao.

Wei Ying attempted to crawl after the little beast but the passage was too narrow for him, so he crawled back and sat down on the ground with a sigh, "There is no way we will catch up to him while he is in the thicket."

"We’ll just go around it. He will have to get out somewhere and there are three of us," said Meng Yao.

"Why the fuss? He will come back if he doesn’t want to die of exposure," said Shen Jiu. Through it all he didn’t move an inch from the place where he was sitting.

"Why did you have to be so nasty to him?" asked Wei Ying.

"He started it!"

"He is a seven-year-old. Can’t you just be an adult for once in your life?" snapped Meng Yao. Somebody who didn’t know him would probably think it was just mild irritation, but Shen Jiu knew better.

"Yao-ge got a point there, Shizun," said Wei Ying awkwardly as he stood up from the ground.

Shen Jiu did not appreciate being ganged up on, but he couldn't shout at them for it because it would just prove their point. "Let's find the little rat before he throws himself off the cliff."

They circled the area several times calling the little beast's name and pleading with him to come back. If he could hear them, he didn't show it. Shen Jiu just assumed that the brat had simply curled up somewhere to sulk and would come out sooner or later, but Meng Yao and Wei Ying were too worried to stop the search.

Meng Yao suggested that the little beast could have decided to go back on his own, so they backtracked looking for his footprints in the snow. Once they returned to the oak tree they had passed on their way here, Shen Jiu heard a far-away crack.

They immediately rushed to the source of the noise. However, once they came closer it became evident that it wasn't the little beast. Five cultivators, dressed in olive green, turned to look at them gloomily. Their sabers left no doubt what sect they belonged to.

"This one was under assumption that this is not the territory of the Nie Sect," said Shen Jiu, studying the cultivators with narrowed eyes.

"Who are you to question us?" asked the one with a thick moustache.

"Calm yourself, Nie Lieyan! Is this any way to talk to a lady?" asked the shortest one. Despite being at least a head shorter than all the other cultivators the man had a certain confidence to him that marked him as the highest ranked cultivator here. His elaborate guan also contributed to this quick conclusion.

"She could be the huli jing in disguise!" protested Nie Lieyan.

"Shizun is no huli jing!" shouted Wei Ying indignantly from Shen Jiu's right side.

"Excuse my cousin," said the short one. "We were heading home when the locals asked us to help with a rampant fox yao. They can be quite tricky with all the illusions."

"Is it the fox yao that terrorised Yishan village?" asked Meng Yao softly. Of course, he somehow learned and remembered the name of the damned village Shen Jiu couldn't have cared less about.

"How do you know that?" asked Nie Lieyan suspiciously.

"We had the pleasure of sharing the carriage with a local man on our way here," explained Meng Yao. "He told us about the sad fate of Yishan."

"You are stupid if you think it's a huli jing. What kind of huli jing makes people kill themselves?" said Wei Ying flippantly.

Shen Jiu very much enjoyed the offended look on Nie Lieyan's face.

"And what do you think it is, young man?" asked the short one, who looked more amused than anything.

"Not a huli jing, that’s for sure," said Wei Ying.

"It’s likely the moon-eyed fox. Qiao Li, the local we travelled with, mentioned that the fox had white fur and white eyes," said Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu read about the moon-eyed foxes before but he didn’t expect to meet one. These beasts were quite rare after all. He recalled that meeting the gaze of the moon-eyed fox was said to inflict terrible visions designed to drive the victim insane. The yao consumed the resulting negative energy.

"You have very capable disciples, Miss," said the short one, sounding genuinely impressed.

Shen Jiu scoffed, "I’m afraid I cannot say the same about your disciples."

Instead of getting offended the short man grinned as if he had heard something funny.

"Do you know who are you talking to, woman?" asked Nie Lieyan, his face red.

"Obviously, I do not. You lot have so little manners that you did not introduce yourself properly," said Shen Jiu. It felt nice to take at least some of his anger on somebody.

"Let me correct our mistake," said the short one. "I am Nie Hongyi."

"The sect leader?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously. He imagined the man to be a giant. At least the girth of the shoulders was as impressive as he had expected.

"Indeed," said the man with a pleased smile. He must have enjoyed the flash of surprise on Shen Jiu’s face. "And you?"

"Shen Shi, rogue cultivator. These are my disciples Yue Yao and Wei Ying."

"Are you also here to hunt the fox spirit?" asked Sect Leader Nie.

"No."

"We are looking for a child of about seven years," interfered Meng Yao. "Have you per chance seen him?"

"What would a child be doing here?" asked Nie Lieyan.

"He is an orphan with cultivation potential. We were taking him to Baixue Temple when he decided to get himself lost," said Shen Jiu. "We are in a hurry to find him, so if you’d excuse us…"

"Wait," said Sect Leader Nie. "Why don’t we join forces? This way we will be able to cover more ground."

"Hongyi, is it necessary to…" began Nie Lieyan.

"You followed the fox's trail here with me. You know it's around, so we have to find the child before it finds him."

Shen Jiu could not argue with that even if he wanted to.

Joining forces was more efficient. However, neither searching on foot nor scouting from air yielded any result. Then the snow started covering whatever traces there could be left.

"There is a snowstorm coming. We need to make camp," declared Sect Leader Nie as the wind was getting stronger.

Shen Jiu agreed, but while the camp was getting set, he turned to the Sect Leader. "Watch my disciples while I am gone. I do not want them to sneak out to 'help' the moment my back is turned."

Nie Hongyi raised his eyebrows. "You want to keep searching alone in this sort of weather? What if you stumble upon the spirit? I am not sure we will even see a flare if the storm gets bad."

"The brat is too skinny. He won't survive the night on his own."

Shen Jiu would be relieved to get rid of the little beast, but if Xue Yang died now, the children would blame him for it. That was not something he wanted. To see disgust in their eyes would be crushing. He could admit this much.

"Then I will go with you," said Sect Leader Nie.

"I did not ask you to."

"What kind of man would I be if I allowed you to go on your own?"

Shen Jiu scoffed but didn't argue.

The search was even more annoying in the middle of a snowstorm. The damned snow got into his eyes and he couldn't see much, relying on the brat's common sense. Even if he was still angry, he had to come out after hearing their calls.

"Xue Yang, you damned brat! If you don't want to freeze to death, come on out already!" Shen Jiu did his best to scream louder than the wind.

Nie Hongyi laughed uproariously at that. "Are you sure that will make him come out? You could try to be sweeter about it!"

"Do I look sweet to you?" asked Shen Jiu. The wind was whistling in his ears.

The sect leader gave him a long look, then answered cheerfully. "You could still try!"

"It's not working. We need to do something different…"

For all he knew, Xue Yang could be dead already. Shen Jiu allowed the freezing wind to hit him with its full force, as he searched for resentful energy. The brat would have a lot of resentment if he died here.

He closed his eyes, but the only resentment he could feel was the small trickle that came from Nie Hongyi. Was it their cultivation style? He remembered it was connected to resentment somehow. The resentful beast core inside the saber…

Shen Jiu opened his eyes. No, it was not the saber… Like a crack in a tea cup, leaking water… Now wasn't the time for this.

"I found this in the bushes," said Sect Leader Nie, holding out the familiar package with herbs. Stupid brat couldn't even keep track of his own things.

"It's his," confirmed Shen Jiu.

"He can still be nearby. Let's spread out a bit."

Shen Jiu nodded and they went in the opposite directions shouting for the damn brat to come out. He came close to the cliff this way and was about to turn back when he saw something move in the bushes.

"Xue Yang! Are you a child or a woodland creature? Come on out!" shouted Shen Jiu ready to start cutting the bush with his sword if the brat didn't come out. However, instead of a child dressed in dark clothes an animal with pure white fur went out.

Shen Jiu jumped back and grabbed his sword. It was too late. He looked the spirit right in the eyes. Jade-like and milky white.

He couldn't feel the wind or cold anymore. The air was fresh and peaceful in the bamboo forest. The soft rustle of leaves was nothing like the howling wind that had been assaulting his hearing only moments before. The familiar path was under his feet, leading to the house that used to belong to him in the past.

"What kind of a nightmare is it?" asked Shen Jiu, gathering his spiritual energy to break the illusion in one powerful blast.

"Qingqiu-shidi?" called the familiar voice behind his back. Shen Jiu's heart missed a beat.

Shen Jiu whirled around. It was really him! Not a look-alike this time. Shen Jiu took a step forward before he remembered the fox. His face twisted in a pained grimace, but still he couldn't drag his eyes away from Yue Qingyuan's face. He knew this might be his last chance to see this face, and that made him falter.

"Where have you been? I have missed you so much!"

Shen Jiu scoffed. "Don't put such words in his mouth! He has to be glad I am gone. Relieved of the old burden at last!"

"Who are you talking to?" asked Yue Qingyuan. "Qingqiu-shidi, are you feeling alright?"

Shen Jiu closed his eyes and started gathering energy again.

"Shizun!" screamed a young voice. The cry was so loud Shen Jiu opened his eyes on instinct. A cute face with a dark bruise on the chin, dirty disciple robes hiding more bruises… Shen Jiu hadn't seen Luo Binghe in so many years that he had forgotten the sound of his voice.

"What do you want?" he asked incredulously. How was that supposed to upset him? It wasn't a pleasant reminder, but he knew what kind of monster he was already.

"I want to know why!" screamed Luo Binghe all righteous indignation. The real one would have never dared to speak to him this way, swallowing down his fury and pride every day.

"Why do you hate me so much?" asked the little beast with such desperation Shen Jiu was taken aback.

"I don't…"

"Why, Shizun?" The little beast morphed before his eyes. The shape of his face changing and his figure becoming slighter. The bruise remained on the child's chin, his dirty rags hiding even more.

"What did I ever do to deserve this?" asked Xiao Jiu.

His eyes stung. Words were stuck in his throat. In a half-forgotten habit he turned to Yue Qi for help. Yue Qingyuan's eyes shone with disgust.

Something hit his cheek. "Wake up, you stupid bitch!" screamed the voice in his ear.

Right. He was in an illusion. Closing his eyes, Shen Jiu finished gathering his cultivation and pushed, shuttering the image of the bamboo forest. When Xue Yang slapped him again, Shen Jiu already returned to the real world.

"Stop it. I am awake," said Shen Jiu, his throat dry. As he opened his eyes, he realised that he was lying on the ground and his back was already wet from the thawing snow. Xue Yang was crouching in front of him looking bored.

"Where have you been?" asked Shen Jiu brushing the snow off his robes as he stood up.

"I fell in a hole," said the boy. On second look, his clothes were visibly dirtier than before.

"You fell in a hole?" repeated Shen Jiu incredulously.

"It was covered with snow so I didn't see! And I only have one hand I can use so…"

They were interrupted by the loud whoosh of Nie Hongyi's saber. He was chasing the fox yao, but the creature was too fast to catch. It didn't help that the man had his eyes closed, allowing his sword to track the beast's resentful energy.

"You awake?" asked the Sect Leader. "Now get out of the way before I cut you two in half by accident."

Shen Jiu complied, dragging the boy with him by the shoulder. The snow storm was not as bad as before, but he didn't want to risk the brat getting lost again.

They stayed close enough to watch the fight. Without them in the line of fire, it didn't take long for the glare of the sword to hit the creature, throwing it against a big rock. The sect leader marched forward to cut its head off.

Out of curiosity, Shen Jiu concentrated on the resentment, coming from Nie Hongyi saber. He was sure that its trickle became slightly wider from the last time he checked. He tried to remember how the man died in the book, but the only thing Shen Jiu remembered was the fact that Wen Ruohan was somehow involved. Didn't his saber break during a night hunt after some sort of foul play?

"Do you have a use for the pelt? It would make a fine pair of hand warmers," said the Sect Leader, approaching Shen Jiu with the dead fox in hand. His smile was almost boyish, though he had to be older than Shen Jiu's current body.

"Don't you want to keep it?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously. He didn't want to risk it being some kind of romantic token.

"Not really. I have inherited enough spirit hides to last a lifetime."

He looked at Nie Hongyi's saber thoughtfully. He was a good man and without him Shen Jiu would probably be dead. There had to be a way he could repay this debt quickly…

"Sect Leader? You might want to check your saber. There is resentment leaking out of it, so I assume there is a crack," said Shen Jiu.

"What?" the smile fell off Nie Hongyi's face quickly.

"Xue Yang, let's go. Meng Yao and Wei Ying had been worried sick about you."

"I didn't realize you knew my name," grumbled the brat.

"I have been calling your name for hours. Where have you been that you didn't hear?"

"In a hole! I told you already!"

"Did the dirt get into your ears?"

Nie Hongyi ran after them. "Wait! Aren't you going to explain? How do you know about the resentment in my saber? And what do you mean by leaking?"

"Take it to an expert. I just made an observation," said Shen Jiu.

"It's a strange observation to make."

"I used to live near Burial Mounds. I learned a thing or two," said Shen Jiu vaguely.

The Sect Leader kept asking questions all the way to the camp, but Shen Jiu ignored him.

Chapter 23: Baixue Temple.

Shen Jiu would rather continue their journey to Baixue Temple without an entourage of brutes who vaguely reminded him of Bai Zhan disciples. The worst thing was that he'd brought it upon himself by giving Sect Leader Nie that cryptic advice. The result felt almost worse than feeling indebted.

"The stairs to the temple are in sight. We hardly require your protection for the last stretch," said Shen Jiu. Nie Hongyi had stuck to him like a burr for almost two days. It was a miracle he hadn't stabbed him yet. Especially that one time Sect Leader Nie had offered to carry him.

"We've already come this far. It won't hurt if I introduce you to the Abbot[1]," said Nie Hongyi. "Bai Lingxiao is a bit… stern."

Shen Jiu frowned. He knew little about Baixue Temple other than its reputation as a famed maker of medicine and cultivation pills, and its strong tradition of taking in orphans. From what he read, the temple reminded him of Qian Cao Peak, so he imagined its leader to be as toothless as Mu Qingfang.

"Do you know the Abbot personally?" probed Shen Jiu.

"Not quite. He is not the type of man you know personally. But my sect buys a lot of medicine from Baixue Temple, so I might have enough sway to make them accept the little spitfire."

"He is an orphan. Why wouldn't they take him?" asked Shen Jiu challengingly. Of course, he knew perfectly well why they wouldn't want the nightmare child. It was still funny to see Nie Hongyi sweat a bit.

"They usually do. But Xiao-Yang… Let's just say that he is an acquired taste," said Nie Hongyi diplomatically.

"He is a bit loud but nothing too unusual for a child," said Shen Jiu, doing his best to keep a straight face.

"He bit Nie Lieyan so hard this morning that there were teeth marks."

"He was provoked, I am sure," said Shen Jiu primly.

The only perk of the Nie following them like a pack of strays was the fact that they could carry Xue Yang for them. The boy made it as difficult for them as he could, and Shen Jiu found it extremely amusing when he wasn't the one being antagonized.

"I'm just saying that it wouldn't hurt to have some backing so they won't throw him out in a month or two for misconduct," said Nie Hongyi with a grin. When Nie Lieyan had been bitten, the Sect Leader laughed so hard Shen Jiu thought he would bring an avalanche upon them.

"Can they actually send him away?" asked Shen Jiu curiously. Kicking a disciple out of Cang Qiong was such a mind-numbingly complicated process that Shen Jiu never bothered with it. It was much easier to make the disciples leave on their own.

He had no idea why thinking about it made him uncomfortable now. He hated this feeling.

"I don't think they do it often, but knowing Xiao-Yang…"

Somehow, despite knowing Xue Yang only for two days, Nie Hongyi had managed to figure him out.

"Fine. You can recommend the brat if you'd like. But he is the one who will owe you for it," said Shen Jiu. He didn't want to be indebted to this clingy stranger in any way.

It didn't take them long to reach the long staircase leading to the Baixue Temple. It was an impressive sight, though unlike Cang Qiong there was nothing otherworldly about it. Embedded in the mountain, the temple could only be seen in full from one side. Its roof towered over the mountain peak, the only part of the temple separate from the mountain.

The temple itself was very dark with no bright accents. The snow covering the roof made its dark-brown wood appear even starker. It looked almost like rosewood, though no one would be insane enough to build a building out of something so expensive.

Two small disciples were sweeping the snow off the stone staircase. Only one of them noticed their procession, hollering something to his sect mate before running upstairs. When they went up, there was a small procession welcoming them, so the disciple must've warned the right people.

"Sect Leader Nie," greeted the woman in the middle of the procession, bowing low. She had a gentle voice, despite the fact that her black clothes and high cheekbones made her appear severe.

"Elder Bai Lu," said the Sect Leader with a nod[2]. What a brute! "Where is the Abbot? I wanted to introduce a friend of mine to him."

Since when had they been friends? Shen Jiu bristled on the inside but didn't comment, careful of appearances.

"Unfortunately, my brother is not available at the moment. He will remain in seclusion until the end of the month. While he is absent, I am in charge of the temple," said the woman serenely. Shen Jiu noticed the silver embroidery on the edges of her sleeves. It was masterful work.

"This is Shen Shi. She found you a new disciple," said Nie Hongyi matter-of-factly. Shen Jiu glared at him. If this was his endorsement, it didn't seem like much.

Shen Jiu bowed to the elder before saying, "This is Xue Yang." He pulled the squirming brat to stand in front of him. "He has great cultivation potential, but as a rogue cultivator I cannot take him in without endangering him needlessly."

Instead, he was endangering everybody in this temple. After all, in the book, Xue Yang ended up killing the entire Baixue Temple, leaving only Song Lan alive.

"What made you think of our temple as a good place for this child?" asked the woman curiously.

"I have read about it and was impressed by your medical expertise. Xue Yang's hand was crushed recently and I hoped that you could help him heal," said Shen Jiu.

He hadn't considered this at all when he made the decision. The only thing he thought about was proximity and the likelihood of them taking in a random street orphan with cultivation talent. He didn't have all that many other options because the world was a pretty shit place, actually.

"Let me see," said Bai Lu, concerned. Xue Yang backed away, bumping into Shen Jiu's legs.

"No, don't touch me, you…" Shen Jiu covered Xue Yang's mouth with his hand quickly.

"Elder Bai Lu won't have to touch your hand. She can just check your wrist," explained Shen Jiu, swallowing his irritation. Getting mad at the brat wouldn't help them.

"That's right. Don't be afraid, little one," said Bai Lu, smiling at the brat encouragingly.

The brat looked in Meng Yao's direction and sighed, before extending his wrist. Bai Lu touched it gently, not making any sudden moves. She didn't seem to like what she saw.

"What a terrible injury!" she said. "How did it happen?"

"His hand was crushed by a passing cart," explained Shen Jiu shortly. "Can you fix his meridians [3]?"

"All of the pathways are misaligned; some are even ruptured. It is nothing we cannot fix, but it will take a course of treatment. You chose the right place to bring him," said Bai Lu.

Shen Jiu pursed his lips. He knew what it was like to have your cultivation potential stunted by old injuries. Master Qiu had made sure that Shen Jiu would never reach his full potential. He wondered whether Xue Yang had trouble with orthodox cultivation in the book. Hand injuries for cultivators were extremely dangerous for a reason.

"Elder Bai Lu, before I go, could we talk about our latest order?" asked Nie Hongyi.

The woman seemed startled, but she quickly recovered. "Of course. We could step into the pavilion for a moment. Disciple Ping, please give our guests a short tour."

Shen Jiu squinted at Nie Hongyi suspiciously. What medicine could they be ordering to require this level of secrecy?

He watched them walk away, feeling more and more high-strung. He shouldn't have told Sect Leader Nie about his saber problem. Knowing that Shen Jiu was aware of the Nie Sect's

secret, the man could be planning his death. Would Bai Lu agree to poison him if asked by Sect Leader Nie? He was just a liability now.

He was so distracted by his anxious thoughts that he paid barely any attention to the tour. It's not like he hadn't seen his fair share of mountains. The most interesting thing about this one was a group of caves with high spiritual energy, but compared to Ling Xi Caves, it was nothing to write home about.

At the end of their tour, Nie Hongyi and Bai Lu joined them again. Shen Jiu glared at the too-happy-looking man. It was all his fault anyway.

"We are going to fly back to our sect now. Till we meet again, Miss Shen," said the man.

"I doubt we will," said Shen Jiu just to be contrary. He turned to Bai Lu, ignoring the Nie sect's departure. "Could we trouble you to stay the night at your temple?"

He didn't want to give Nie Hongyi a chance to follow them around while they trekked back down the mountain.

"Of course," said the woman. "It would be nice if you could stay until the end of the winter. Xue Yang clearly feels more comfortable with you and your disciples, so it would be wonderful if you could stay until he settles in fully."

Shen Jiu frowned. "Of course, we could stay for a few weeks, but staying until the end of the winter is excessive."

He didn't want to risk them kicking Xue Yang out while he was around. Meng Yao and Wei Ying would just make him take the brat back.

"If you stay, you can use our caves for meditation. Your disciples seem to be approaching the age when young cultivators form golden cores. It is a perfect place for that."

Shen Jiu bit the inside of his cheek. It seemed like a trap, but she did make a good point. Meng Yao could have gotten his golden core years ago. However, Shen Jiu hadn't wanted his disciple to get a golden core before him. Once he had his golden core, there just hadn't been any time for the boy to do that.

Both Meng Yao and Wei Ying could form their golden cores now, but with their new lifestyle, there was no telling when they would be able to do that. If Shen Jiu didn't figure something out, he could actually cripple Meng Yao's potential, and he didn't want that.

He didn't want to take the offer, but it seemed to be in the children's best interest.

"We will be happy to stay if you will have us."

That evening, sitting in the humble quarters they had been provided, Shen Jiu finally had time to think. He wondered whether he had made a mistake. He did not trust Nie Hongyi not to set some sort of plan in motion, and he trusted Bai Lu even less.

Wei Ying, who had been wandering around the room restlessly, finally settled onto the floor mats next to Shen Jiu. "Are you sure we should leave A-Yang here, Shizun? This doesn't seem like a good place for him. Everybody is so stuffy."

Shen Jiu sighed. "As I already said, he will be a liability if we take him with us."

"We could take him to Lotus Pier!" suggested Wei Ying brightly.

Shen Jiu imagined the little brat calling Yu Ziyuan a bitch to her face and shuddered. That would just end with somebody dead.

"He might benefit from the structure," said Shen Jiu half-heartedly. He did realize that Xue Yang would be a problem wherever he went. He just didn't want to deal with this problem himself.

"He doesn't need structure, he needs family! And he fits in with us, doesn't he? I can tell that you're getting used to him. I saw you laugh when he bit Nie Lieyan!"

Shen Jiu faltered. It was hard to argue with Wei Ying when he appealed to emotions instead of logic.

"Let Mother decide, A-Ying. I am sure she is keeping A-Yang's best interests in mind," interjected Meng Yao. Shen Jiu squinted at him suspiciously. He thought Meng Yao would also be pressuring him to keep the brat.

"But you said…" started Wei Ying.

"I know what I said. But after what happened at the mountain, I don't think it's a good idea to force them to tolerate each other if they don't want to. It won't lead to anything good," explained Meng Yao.

"Did you two conspire to make me keep the brat?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously.

"Yes! Did I do a good job convincing you, at least?" asked Wei Ying.

Shen Jiu ignored him. "I have no idea why you would involve Wei Ying in this. That's just asking for a disaster to happen."

"Yao-ge said that you trust me more because I usually say what's on my mind," said Wei Ying.

There was some truth to this. Wei Ying was so carefree that he never bothered with subterfuge or lying, so Shen Jiu usually took him at face value, and that made their conversations relaxing.

Ning Yingying used to have a similar effect on him. It was strange to think that those two shared more than a character in their names.

Meng Yao didn't seem to appreciate such honesty. "A-Ying," he hissed crossly.

"What? She already knows we were trying to manipulate her!"

Shen Jiu laughed at that. It was hard to be mad when faced with such ridiculousness. He flicked Wei Ying's forehead, making the boy squeak indignantly. "How are you going to fool me next time if you tell me everything now? Think ahead!"

"Ugh! I hate doing this. Why can't all people just be honest?" asked Wei Ying, rubbing his forehead. Shen Jiu had not flicked him hard enough to warrant the gesture.

"If people were honest all the time, the world would be even worse than it already is," said Shen Jiu bluntly.

"Wars would break out," added Meng Yao. "Constant fighting everywhere."

"A lot of people would die for simply saying the truth," said Shen Jiu.

If Shen Jiu had been honest when he was a child, he wouldn't have lived long enough for his voice to break.

"Families would fall apart," said Meng Yao.

"Most people simply wouldn't have any friends or loved ones," said Shen Jiu.

"Okay, okay, I get it! This is getting too grim," shouted Wei Ying.

Dealing with the children's half-brained plotting and explaining basic rules of the world to Wei Ying somehow managed to give Shen Jiu enough of a distraction to actually fall asleep. In the morning, a disciple came to take them to the cave they were permitted to use for meditation.

Shen Jiu repeated the instructions for the tenth time: "Remember to imagine the golden core in your mind. It's like a golden pearl in your abdomen. Shining with power, like a small sun."

He didn't know why he was feeling so anxious. This was far from the first time he had guided disciples in forming their golden cores.

"How long is it going to take?" asked Wei Ying.

"It's individual. Anything from a week to several months. No matter what, don't rush it!" said Shen Jiu. "If you need months, take months. This is something you won't be able to correct once you're done."

"Are you sure we are ready?" asked Meng Yao with uncharacteristic nervousness.

"You have been ready for months. I know you two will succeed. That's why I am permitting it," said Shen Jiu. "Now I'll leave you. I'll come to check on you every day, but you won't see me. Focus on meditation and don't think about anything unnecessary."

Shen Jiu left them with a heavy heart. He knew that they were ready. Their foundation was excellent, and both of the boys were brilliant in their own way. If something happened, Shen

Jiu would be immediately alerted by the array in the cave. Still, he couldn't help but worry.

With the children in seclusion, Shen Jiu was left alone to battle his boredom. The temple's modest library provided him with something to do, but the collection mostly consisted of pious, philosophical drivel that seemed to drive Shen Jiu mad with every pretentious word.

Desperate for entertainment, Shen Jiu reread "Green Plum, Black Despair", rolling his eyes at the unrealistically happy ending. Those two would never get to marry in the real world, not after everything that had happened with the Emperor. In fact, in the real world, they would have been executed. Shen Jiu had no idea why he kept rereading this crap.

Other than reading, there was not much he could occupy himself with. He meditated, he checked on his disciples, he went on solitary walks, he dealt with complaints about Xue Yang's behavior. In all honesty, he would rather not have to go through the last one.

"Can you start from the beginning?" asked Shen Jiu, looking down at the tiny disciple in black robes. He would have sent this little brat to speak to Bai Lu instead, but the boy introduced himself as Song Lan. It was best to keep an eye on another character from the book.

"This one reprimanded outer disciple Xue Yang for stealing food off the breakfast table…" started Song Lan. Judging from his black robes, he was one of the youngest inner disciples, so he must have decided that this gave him the right to police the outer ones. What a headache.

"Define stealing," said Shen Jiu.

"He put all the baozi in his sleeve even though they are meant for everyone to enjoy," said Song Lan. Some righteous indignation bled into his voice.

"After seeing that, what exactly did you tell him?"

"I said that the baozi were meant for everybody to share and that these are the rules he has to follow if he wants to stay at the temple. He didn't listen, so I tried to take the bag away. That's when he bit me!"

Song Lan demonstrated to Shen Jiu the bleeding bite wound on his hand. In Shen Jiu's opinion, he had it coming, but he had to play the role of the responsible adult here, so he couldn't say it.

"What happened next?" he asked with morbid curiosity.

"I told him that he will never become a cultivator if he keeps acting like an animal. Then he spat at me and called me obscene words," said Song Lan.

Shen Jiu sighed. This was not his responsibility, but he didn't imagine Bai Lu would have much success negotiating with Xue Yang.

"I am certain Xue Yang did not mean to offend you. He simply has trouble settling into polite society after living on the streets for so long. I will speak to him about it."

That was a bold faced lie and Shen Jiu knew it better than anyone. Was that what Yue Qingyuan felt like? Shen Jiu banished the thought.

Song Lan thanked him and bowed deeply before leaving. Shen Jiu wondered whether Xue Yang would kill him sooner or later if they were living in the same temple. Those two seemed to get along as well as a cat and a dog.

Finding Xue Yang turned out to be an even more annoying task than having to listen to complaints about the brat. With his injured hand, Xue Yang couldn't participate in the chores, and he had managed to alienate most of the other outer disciples, so nobody knew where he spent his time.

Shen Jiu found the brat entirely by chance: he made a detour to check on Meng Yao and Wei Ying and found Xue Yang studying the array at the entrance of the cave.

"What are you doing here?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously.

"Nothing."

"The array won't let you inside no matter how much you try," said Shen Jiu.

"When are they going to come out of there? It's been ages!" complained the brat, kicking a rock. It flew right into the array and was reflected, flying right past Xue Yang's legs.

"They will take as long as they need. You can't rush forming a golden core."

"Why did they have to go meditate while I have to stay with all those stuck-up jerks here?" complained the brat.

"Without a golden core, you cannot be a real cultivator," explained Shen Jiu. "And speaking of other disciples, do you have to make enemies everywhere you go? I had no less than five people complain to me about you biting them, cursing at them, or threatening to stab them."

"Why would they go to you?" asked Xue Yang, genuinely outraged.

"I don't know! They are getting on my nerves, so try not to piss off any more people while I am here."

"It's easy for you to say! You don't have to be around them every day. They are so stupid! They think that because some tall and pretty cultivator lady picked them off the streets to work for her, that somehow makes them special. Most of them are not any better than servants, and now they want me to be grateful that I can be one too? Fuck them, and fuck you for bringing me here in the first place!"

That ungrateful little…

Shen Jiu put his hand behind his back to suppress the desire to grab the brat. Being violent wouldn't help anything, and he would feel uneasy about it afterward. He took a deep breath. Shouting wouldn't help either.

"Do you want to be treated like dirt your whole life?" asked Shen Jiu calmly.

The brat squinted at him as if he was thinking whether it was a trick question or not. "No," he said finally.

"The only way for someone like us to be treated as humans worthy of common decency is to become cultivators. This place is the best opportunity you have. Don't lose it because you can't stand playing by the rules."

"Someone like us?" repeated Xue Yang.

"Did you think I was brought up in a respected family? I'm gutter trash, just like you," Shen Jiu said. He wasn't sure he had ever admitted it to anyone. It was strange to say it out loud.

"Really? Were you a criminal? Is that why you hide your real name?" Xue Yang got strangely excited about it.

"What do you mean my real name?"

"I heard you call Yao-ge Meng Yao once. Meng is your real family name, right? Because when I asked him about it, he got really strange about it…"

Shen Jiu felt the blood leave his face. "When did I say that?"

"Um, I don't remember. After that Nie guy killed the spirit, I think."

Shen Jiu wondered whether Nie Hongyi had heard him slip up like this. It was such a stupid mistake to make, and in front of someone like him, it was just too dangerous.

There was no way for him to leave Baixue Temple now. Not with the children in the cave. So he tried to forget about his worries, distracting himself with questioning Xue Yang about his treatment. It didn't work for long, but it was something else to think about.

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[1] Abbot (住持) - Zhùchí. The supreme spiritual leader, administrative head, and legal representative of the temple.return to text ↩

[2] Despite the difference in status the polite greeting would be a bow. Nie Hongyi finds the formalities too annoying to bother with if they are not strictly required. return to text ↩

[3] In xianxia, meridians are the invisible pathways through which life-energy (qi) flows. Any damage to them is not just a physical injury but a catastrophic impairment of one's cultivation potential, often leading to chronic pain and issues with cultivation.return to text ↩

Chapter 24: Moral dilemmas.

With a single sharp movement of his wrist, the dark tree grew on the misty cliff, its darkness stark against the muted background. Shen Jiu set about adding the leaves, making sure the tree shape appeared sufficiently mournful.

"What are you doing?" asked Xue Yang, bending over the table to look at the painting. The boy almost got his sleeve into the ink, his manner utterly graceless.

Shen Jiu didn't allow the annoyance to interrupt his work, though the tree ended up more menacing than mournful, reflecting his mood. Xue Yang had been like a mosquito lately: you could wave him away, but he would return quickly just as annoying.

"If you're painting trees, why are they black and white? You are rich enough to have colors, right?"

"This is a special art style[1]. It's supposed to reflect the high skill level of the artist, so paintings like this one can be more expensive than color paintings."

Shen Jiu knew this firsthand. His paintings used to bring his sect a considerable profit. The irony of the noble scions paying outrageous sums of money for the work done by a former slave never ceased to amuse him.

"Do rich people not like colors in their paintings? That's strange." A grabby hand tried to get hold of one of Shen Jiu's brushes, and he covered the brush with his hand protectively.

Only Meng Yao was allowed to use Shen Jiu's brushes. Wei Ying was forbidden from touching them after Shen Jiu saw him nibble at the wooden end of the brush once. He didn't even want to imagine what atrocities Xue Yang could end up doing with a brush.

"Go play outside. You're distracting me," said Shen Jiu.

"It's boring there! Everywhere I go Song Lan is following me like a city guard," Xue Yang laid his upper body on the table and then rolled down onto the floor dramatically. He probably shouldn't have done it with his hand still on the mend.

"What makes him think he can tell me what to do?" asked Xue Yang. He didn't bother standing up, remaining on the floor.

"You shouldn't have stolen those gardening tools if you didn't want his attention," said Shen Jiu, as he added the final, delicate stroke to the ink wash painting. He planned to add a poem once it dried, but he had yet to choose one. It had to be something pretentious but in a refined way.

"I wanted to check if I could make a tunnel under the barrier, so I needed a shovel," explained Xue Yang.

Shen Jiu glanced at the body lounging on the floor. Xue Yang's mind had an impressive capacity for creativity. No wonder his version from the book managed to follow in Wei Wuxian's footsteps. It took someone special to understand the workings of that mind.

As he carefully cleaned his brushes, Shen Jiu noted the long shadows on the floor. The evening was approaching.

"Isn't it time for your treatment?" asked Shen Jiu pointedly.

Xue Yang groaned. "Why do I have to come every day? She doesn't even stab me with needles anymore! She just pours some gross goop onto my hand. I can do it myself!"

"Elder Bai Lu needs to check how your meridians are healing. Have some gratitude! She's wasting her precious time on you," said Shen Jiu.

"What precious time?" grumbled Xue Yang, hauling himself upright from the floor. "All they do here is train, meditate, and drink bitter tea."

As Xue Yang stood up, his hair was in complete disarray. Shen Jiu felt an itch to correct it, but didn't permit himself. This boy wasn't his responsibility.

With his painting drying and the annoyance gone, Shen Jiu had little to occupy himself. He went to check on his disciples. When he gave the cave's entrance a closer look, it became clear that somebody had tried to dig under the barrier but had given up as soon as it became obvious it wouldn't work. Shen Jiu felt the corners of his mouth lift. What a persistent brat.

As he turned to leave for his quarters, an unfamiliar man in black robes approached Shen Jiu. At first glance he appeared young, but the frost of grey hair at his temples revealed his actual age.

"You must be Miss Shen," said the man, his face and his voice frigidly detached.

Shen Jiu had a good idea who he was. "This one is afraid you have the advantage of me."

"Bai Lingxiao. The Abbot of this temple," said the man. His enunciation was odd, as if he was reciting a stranger's name. Shen Jiu had met people like this before. Pedantic fools severing their emotions to achieve the enlightenment. What kind of enlightenment could there be in an empty void?

"Then this one thanks you for your hospitality," said Shen Jiu, aching to leave. This man's company was about as pleasing as a corpse's.

"My sister made a mistake in permitting you to use our caves," said the Abbot.

"Did she?"

"Do not take it personally. I simply prefer to ensure that the people who use our caves are worthy of the power they achieve."

Shen Jiu hated this man. "And what makes one worthy?"

"Strong morals, righteous inclinations, an absence of heart demons… As a teacher, you should know the requirements. This one can recommend educational literature, if required."

Shen Jiu smiled. "Then this one is sure you will not be disappointed once you meet my disciples personally."

For the first time during their conversation, the Abbot looked him in the eye. "We shall see."

Wei Ying, of course, could not fail a judgement of morality and righteousness. Meng Yao could do even better, putting on a performance good enough to gain himself sainthood. Shen Jiu had no doubt they would be deemed worthy. Xue Yang, however, was another story.

The conversation with the Abbot felt like a bucket of ice-cold water dumped over his head. He needed to speak to Xue Yang about his behavior as soon as possible. From what little Shen Jiu had seen, Bai Lu was too soft-hearted to punish the brat. However, it didn't seem like her brother would show mercy to a misbehaving child.

The very next morning, the talisman that Shen Jiu had connected to the meditation cave flared, alerting him to movement. He dressed in a hurry and rushed to the caves, anxious to see which of his disciples was the first one to exit. Upon seeing Meng Yao, a wave of relief soothed Shen Jiu's nerves.

In strength and skill, his disciples were neck-and-neck for years despite the age difference. Meng Yao had the upper hand when it came to knowledge, while Wei Ying had a uniquely inventive mind. Despite that, Shen Jiu couldn't but worry that being surpassed by his little brother would fester the resentment in Meng Yao's heart.

"Mother, I did it!" said the boy. For a change, his smile was wide and childish, showing his teeth. Shen Jiu liked it much better than the usual polite one.

Shen Jiu grabbed the boy's thin wrist. The golden core shone like a small sun, the foundation firm and the meridians perfect. Under Shen Jiu's tutelage Meng Yao grew into a strong cultivator, unlike his book counterpart. Shen Jiu had a feeling that the boy would quickly surpass him, and for some reason, he didn't feel bitter about it.

"You did well," said Shen Jiu, allowing a smile to bloom on his face. Meng Yao's eyes widened in wonder, making him look like an adorable woodland creature. Not knowing what to do, Shen Jiu mimicked Jiang Fengmian, patting Meng Yao's head stiffly.

Shen Jiu took his hand off Meng Yao's head at the first shimmer of tears and changed the topic quickly. "At least now that you're back you can entertain Xue Yang. He has been more of a nuisance lately, coming to bother me at all times of day."

"I'm glad that you two are getting along," said Meng Yao. Shen Jiu huffed in response. He didn't think that their conversations could be considered getting along.

Despite Shen Jiu's words, Xue Yang didn't come to bother him all day. And in the evening, the talisman flared once more, indicating that Wei Ying was out. There was something poetic about it: one brother coming out with the sun and the other with the moon.

"Do I look more handsome already?" asked Wei Ying, striking a dramatic pose that made Meng Yao stifle a laugh.

"Wipe the snot off your face before you ask that," said Shen Jiu, grabbing the brat's wrist. Wei Ying was clearly a rare talent, his core shining slightly brighter than Meng Yao's, despite the lack of discipline and sporadic training.

"Will I always feel like this now?" asked Wei Ying eagerly. "It's like I swallowed a star!"

"You will get used to it," said Shen Jiu. He suddenly remembered that in the book Wei Ying lost his golden core and it turned his stomach to even imagine. Wei Ying was not allowed to make such a stupid sacrifice on Shen Jiu's watch.

"Good job," said Shen Jiu blandly.

"We are proud of you, A-Ying," said Meng Yao with warmth. Wei Ying beamed at them brightly.

They got so caught up in the elation that they didn't think about Xue Yang until the next morning. Wei Ying ran off to fetch the brat for lunch but came back alone, a frown on his face.

"He wasn't there. I asked around but they said they didn't see him today."

"Did he make any friends here?" asked Meng Yao, his brow etched with concern. "Someone we can ask where he is."

"No friends. But he has a particularly insistent enemy," said Shen Jiu thoughtfully.

They found Song Lan with other disciples, having their midday meal. Just as Wei Ying had reported, Xue Yang was nowhere to be seen.

"Disciple Song," called Shen Jiu, his voice ringing over the disciples' murmurs. "When was the last time you saw Xue Yang?"

The boy scrambled to bow. "Yesterday during breakfast."

"And did he do or say anything troubling?" asked Shen Jiu.

Usually Song Lan would take the opportunity to tattle on the little brat, but this time he faltered. "He told us… what happened to his hand," said Song Lan after a long pause.

"And?" Shen Jiu stepped closer, towering over the child.

"He said that he is going to kill the man who hurt him once he learns cultivation," whispered Song Lan. "It was… I had to report it to the elders."

Wei Ying started saying something about snitches, but was quickly silenced by Meng Yao. Shen Jiu ignored the commotion behind him, pinning Song Lan with his eyes.

"Thoughts of revenge breed heart demons[2] and heart demons lead to qi deviation," recited Song Lan. "I had to report it for his own good."

"I see," said Shen Jiu. "Then it seems that we have to discuss this issue with the Abbot."

"This Song Lan is a tattle-tale," said Wei Ying as they walked toward the Abbot's office.

"He acted according to his teachings," said Meng Yao, ever the diplomat. "Mother, did you meet the Abbot while we were in seclusion?"

"Only once. Don't speak unless spoken to," said Shen Jiu.

The wing of the temple housing the Abbot's office was colder than the rest of the building and strangely drafty. The hiss of wind through unseen gaps was the only sound in the hollow silence.

The office itself was empty of adornments: a simple table, shelves laden with books and scrolls, a single weapon case at the far end of the room. Much like its owner, it lacked personality.

"Miss Shen," stated the Abbot once they entered. "And I presume these are your disciples."

"Yue Yao and Wei Ying," said Shen Jiu. "They wish to see their friend, but he appears to be missing."

"Disciple Xue is unwell," said the Abbot flatly.

"Is he? Is there any way we could see him?"

"That would get in the way of treatment," said the Abbot.

"What is the cause of this sudden illness? It sounds concerning," pushed Shen Jiu.

"That knowledge is sensitive. However, if you and your disciples can demonstrate your commitment to the righteous path, you may be deemed... trustworthy."

"And how can we demonstrate it?" asked Shen Jiu tensely.

"I want your disciples to solve a dilemma. You're a healer of great talent in possession of a rare medicine. One day, an entourage arrives, demanding you heal their master. This man is a notorious tyrant, responsible for a devastating war, who now seeks to conquer more land. What do you do?"

"A talented healer knows how to poison in a way that won't be noticed," said Wei Ying. "A man like this dying is good for everyone. Isn't the solution obvious?"

"One should take into account that if the tyrant dies suddenly the healer can be blamed and executed," said Meng Yao. "I think the best solution is to give the man something to alleviate his pain but let the illness run its course. Meanwhile, a trusted healer could attempt to correct

the tyrant’s behavior. If he was told that his unrighteousness is the root of the illness, the tyrant could be persuaded to change."

The Abbot didn’t react in any way to their answers, remaining stiff as a stone wall. After a long pause he spoke again, "Here is another dilemma. You are a cultivator with medical knowledge wandering the land. One day you find a dying man on the side of the road. You can save the man’s life easily, but then you recognise him as the man who murdered your brother. What do you do?"

"Of course, a healer’s duty is to help, no matter who needs it. However, filial duty to your brother is also important and shouldn’t be neglected. I think it’s best to heal the murderer and then take him to the authorities to receive due justice," said Meng Yao dutifully.

"But if he's a murderer, they'd just execute him anyway," said Wei Ying. "Isn’t it just a waste of time and effort? I think it’s better to put the murderer out of his misery and then perform proper rites so he wouldn’t come back as a fierce corpse or resentful ghost."

Meng Yao practically vibrated with nervous energy, indicating that Wei Ying would be ruthlessly reprimanded once they were out of sight of adults. Shen Jiu sighed. He must have missed some spots in Wei Ying’s education if the boy thought that was a normal answer to give.

"And how would you solve those two dilemmas, Miss Shen?" asked the Abbot.

"I wouldn’t," said Shen Jiu with a shrug. "Riddles like these are useless. Too many unanswered questions, hanging in the air. Does the tyrant have an heir or a right-hand man who could take reins of the war after his death? What are the tyrant’s exact crimes other than warmongering? If my brother was murdered then why didn’t I get justice for him before? What were the circumstances?" Shen Jiu gestured emphatically as he expressed his opinion.

Then he continued, a tad more softly. "Real life has more aspects to it. In any case, debating bare hypotheses is useless. People lie to their teachers and to themselves, so it’s impossible to say what one would actually do in any situation. Especially if the details are so vague."

Shen Jiu hated moral dilemmas. His Shizun loved to throw them at disciples and no matter what answer you chose it was always a wrong one. That used to drive Shen Jiu insane to the point that he gave his Shizun a similar speech to the one he repeated now. He was made head disciple not long after that.

"You are well-spoken and not lacking in education, Miss Shen," said the Abbot blandly. "However, it is clear that the path you walk is muddled and your teachings are lacking. Disciple Wei is filled with dangerous ideas you have not corrected to this day, and disciple Yue has a wicked mind he had been taught to conceal."

"Your concerns are noted," said Shen Jiu blandly. "Now tell me, where is Xue Yang?"

"He has been poisoning the other disciples with dangerous ideas, so I saw it fit to give him personal corrections," said the Abbot. Shen Jiu felt sick.

"Your corrections are not needed. I will have Xue Yang back in my care," said Shen Jiu.

"You are not equipped to deal with a disturbed child like him."

"Neither are you. A-Yao, A-Ying, go collect our things. We are leaving as soon as I get Xue Yang back," said Shen Jiu. If this turned violent, Shen Jiu wanted the children away.

He didn't take his eyes off the Abbot as the boys left the room. The man didn't seem concerned with his attention.

"Do not make me threaten you," said Shen Jiu, his voice low. "Or are you willing to fight me because of a single orphan with no cultivation training?"

"Disciple Yang is in seclusion. He is not supposed to leave it until he lets go of his resentment," said the Abbot after a pause.

"Then he will simply die in seclusion," said Shen Jiu. "Take me to him."

The Abbot must have realized that arguing was futile as he stood up and walked past Shen Jiu with his hand clasped behind his back. This almost casual attitude made something inside Shen Jiu burn in fury, but he didn't let it out, following after the Abbot silently.

The seclusion chamber Xue Yang was in wasn't located in the caves. He didn't have cultivation to keep himself warm, so he had to stay indoors. It's not that he needed spiritual energy as his seclusion was more of a way to force him to change his way of thinking than an actual meditative seclusion.

Shen Jiu watched in silence as the Abbot unlocked one of the nondescript doors far in the depths of the temple. The moment the door was open, Shen Jiu walked in. At the far end of the completely bare room, Xue Yang was watching the door cautiously, his pose and expression like a caged animal

The boy sprang to his feet immediately and rushed at Shen Jiu, making him tense in anticipation. But instead of an expected attack, he was hit with a child's scrawny body. Xue Yang wailed as he clung to Shen Jiu's robes, his snotty face dangerously close to clean fabric.

"I don't want to stay here! Please, I'll behave, just don't leave me here!" begged the child growing incoherent.

"Calm yourself. This temple is clearly not fit for you, so you'll be coming with us," said Shen Jiu helplessly. Perhaps he should have asked Meng Yao to stay with him.

"If you wish well for disciple Yang, you should leave him in our care or find a regular family to take him in. Your path is too dangerous for a child with such heavy resentment in him," said the Abbot.

Xue Yang, who seemed not to have noticed the Abbot's presence, startled violently. He released Shen Jiu's robes and scrambled back. Shen Jiu used this opportunity to face the Abbot as he spoke to him, "Xue Yang is no longer your concern."

Shen Jiu noticed the projectile fly past him, but wasn't quick enough to catch it. The small stone hit the Abbot right in the middle of his forehead, leaving a bleeding red wound that resembled a huadian. For the first time since Shen Jiu met the Abbot, the man's face changed expression, turning into the mien of mild surprise.

"Because of people like you bad people are everywhere!" screamed Xue Yang, stepping out from behind Shen Jiu's back. "You don't want to see the bad and you don't, so they do what they like. And you don't do nothing to stop it! Why do I have to forget, why do I have to give up my resentment, when the cultivator who did this to me is living happily somewhere?"

"Child, you simply cannot pursue the path of cultivation with such resentment in your heart," said the Abbot. His voice took an almost gentle cadence, reminding Shen Jiu of Bai Lu.

"Then I'll find another way!"

"Let's go," said Shen Jiu, dragging the boy behind him. The faster they left the Temple, the better.

Meng Yao and Wei Ying were waiting for them at the foot of the temple stairs. The relief on their faces when they saw Xue Yang was palpable.

"Was there any trouble?" asked Meng Yao, not bothering to hide his anxiety.

"No."

"I hit the main jerk with a stone. Got him right in the middle of the forehead," bragged Xue Yang. Any traces of his earlier hysterics were gone.

"No way!" said Wei Ying, delighted. "Shizun, is that true?"

"He has got good aim. Now move along, I want to get out of this place already," said Shen Jiu.

"Wait!" called Bai Lu, rushing toward them. "You don't have to leave now! My brother was…"

"You don't have to make excuses," said Shen Jiu. "We are leaving, so your benefactor will have to remain disappointed."

He didn't put two and two together until that moment, but now it seemed clear to him. Bai Lu permitted them to use the caves, despite knowing that her brother wouldn't approve, and now she seemed determined to stop them from leaving.

The benefactor in question intercepted them two days into their trek down the mountain, so Bai Lu must have had a way to contact him swiftly.

"Miss Shen," he greeted. "Or should I say Miss Meng?"

Nie Hongyi was smiling as if they were joking around.

"What do you want?" hissed Shen Jiu. He should've allowed Sect Leader Nie to die as he was supposed to. It would save him a lot of trouble.

"I want to invite you to my sect."

"And why would you want a former whore in your sect?" asked Shen Jiu. If the man had some lustful inclinations towards his person, he was going to castrate him.

"We Nie come from the line of butchers[3]
. It would be unfilial of me to look down on you for your former profession," said Nie Hongyi.

"Then what use do you have of bringing up my past?"

"I simply wanted to show you that I made certain inquiries. It's not something that should be hidden when you aim for building trust."

Shen Jiu gave the Sect Leader an incredulous look, "What use do you have of my trust?"

"You saved my life," said Nie Hongyi solemnly. "Not only do I owe you for this, it would be foolish to let a person like you slip through my fingers. It took our blacksmith an hour-long ritual to see something that you could notice with your naked eye."

Shen Jiu could see where it was going and he wasn't sure how he felt about it.

"I know little of your cultivation style. I simply have extended knowledge of resentment."

"That's exactly what we need! Perhaps you will be the one to finally find the way to fix our problem." Nie Hongyi was vague about his sect's cultivation method, likely to keep the children from learning too much. However, Shen Jiu understood what the man wanted from him and it seemed like an interesting challenge. Better than the boring night hunt.

"And what about the official reason for my stay at your sect?" asked Shen Jiu. He didn't need the repeat of Lotus Pier.

"My good-for-nothing youngest son is always in need of new teachers, and I heard only good things about your talents in this regard. I doubt that you can do much for his cultivation, but he would be entertained with some painting lessons."

Shen Jiu chewed at his inner cheek thoughtfully. The offer was interesting, and he would always be able to leave. However, he wasn't sure whether he was walking into another scandal.

"Children," he called. "What do you think?"

Meng Yao was the first to answer. "It's a good offer, Mother. You said it yourself that night hunting would be difficult if A-Yang stays with us."

"Nie disciples get the best night hunts," said Wei Ying. "It could be fun!"

Without thinking of it too much, Shen Jiu looked at Xue Yang expectantly. The boy seemed startled by the attention: "Do they have sweet food in their sect?"

Nie Hongyi laughed, "All the sweet food that you want, kid!"

"I guess I don’t mind going," said Xue Yang.

Shen Jiu nodded. So Nie Sect it was. At least this time there wouldn’t be an angry wife getting in his way.

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[1] Ink Wash Painting is a traditional Chinese art form using black ink diluted with water to create monochrome, expressive artworks, emphasizing fluid brushwork, simplicity, and capturing the spirit of a subject over realistic detail. return to text ↩

[2] A Heart Demon is an internal manifestation of a cultivator's deepest psychological and spiritual flaws. return to text ↩

[3] In Ancient China, butchers and prostitutes were both classified among the "mean people" (贱民 jiànmín), a legally and socially degraded caste. Viewed as ritually "unclean" due to their association with death/blood and moral transgression, they faced severe restrictions: their status was often hereditary, they were barred from changing professions, wearing silk, or marrying commoners.

By bringing up his sect’s low origin, Nie Hongyi says that if he looked down on a person from this group, he would also be offending his ancestors. It’s a good sentiment, though not all the Nie would share it. Even regular butchers looked down on prostitutes. While butchers were considered “unclean” for spilling blood, their service was necessary, unlike the work of prostitutes.return to text ↩

On moral dilemmas.

As you can probably guess from this chapter, I am a big fan of moral dilemmas. Though I didn’t consider how much Chinese philosophy I would have to learn to write this chapter even semi accurately. For those who have questions or are curious about the two dilemmas in this chapter, here is more information:

1) The Healer and the Tyrant. I made it up, of course, but it’s still a classic “lesser evil” moral dilemma. The "righteous" answer expected by the Abbot would be a refusal to treat: a healer's duty is to life, but aiding a known aggressor isn’t righteous. This dilemma in particular was somewhat inspired by Wen Qing’s difficult position.

2) The Healer and the Brother's Murderer. This one was actually inspired by Xue Yang and Xiao Xingchen. The dilemma, though, has more of an edge, because filial piety demands seeking justice for your brother. The Abbot's desired answer was that the healer's duty to life must be more important than personal vengeance. He would begrudgingly accept handing the murderer to the authorities, but only if framed as preventing future crimes, not as revenge.

It’s also worth saying that the Abbot has an extremely rigid way of thinking and he was already expecting failure. Most righteous Sect Leaders and even Lan Qiren would actually praise Meng Yao’s answers. Wei Ying’s answers, however, would horrify most people.

Chapter 25: The Impure Realm.

The howling wind threw the sharp shards of snow in their faces, slowing down their pace. The dark grey walls of the Impure Realm towered over them in silent judgment, making the quiet elegance of Qing Jing Peak seem like a memory from another life. The Nie banner snapped in the gale, its ugly snout twisted in a roar, echoed by the wind. Shen Jiu felt a long-forgotten instinct to snarl back.

He had been so proud when the large dog turned its tail and ran away from his snarl. All the other slaves were afraid of it, but he wasn't going to allow some dumb mutt to bully him. Back then he didn't understand why Qi-ge looked sad after hearing of his achievement. Shen Jiu never could understand where a slave boy like Yue Qi got his pride.

Shen Jiu shook his head, banishing the memories. He glanced at the children to check whether they were keeping up, amused to see Xue Yang bare his teeth at the banner.

"It looks like a tyrant's fortress!" said Wei Ying, his voice filled with awe. Sometimes Shen Jiu suspected that taking Wei Ying to Burial Mounds regularly had somehow warped the boy's still developing mind.

"A-Ying," chided Meng Yao, glancing at the amused Nie Hongyi cautiously. Shen Jiu scoffed. If the man didn't like what he heard, he shouldn't have insisted on escorting them personally.

"People whose ancestors named their residence the Impure Realm have no right to be offended by such comparisons," said Shen Jiu, earning a look of helpless horror from Meng Yao.

"I think it sounds cool," said Wei Ying dreamily.

"You will fit right in, kid," said Nie Hongyi with a grin.

As soon as they came close to the fortress, Nie Hongyi raised his right arm, his fist clenched. Two figures in dark-green robes bowed silently, and only a few moments later the massive wooden gate began to rise, its movement smooth despite the weight. The only noise over the wind was the metallic hiss of moving chains.

One could call the Nie a lot of things, but incompetent wasn't one of them. At least, not yet. Nie Huaisang was going to be a challenge. One that Shen Jiu wasn't sure he even wanted to take up. Nie Huaisang wasn't somebody Shen Jiu wanted to teach: a young master full of potential that he was happily squandering in thoughtless hedonism.

In fact, when he got students like this, his usual solution was to allow them to waste any potential they had. A part of Shen Jiu wanted to take this route, but something inside him rebelled against the decision. Hadn't Shen Jiu been called lazy by thoughtless brutes simply because his cultivation style was different? Because he preferred more refined things in life to rolling around in the dirt?

"Welcome to the Impure Realm," announced Nie Hongyi proudly as they walked into the snarling mouth of the fortress.

The welcome they received was rather pungent. Shen Jiu was used to all kinds of odours, but something about this smell made his stomach turn. It had a strange metallic tang to it mixed with something burnt. But the worst of all was the sourness that seemed to cling to Shen Jiu's tongue, making him want to gag.

Despite the weather, Shen Jiu took out one of his fans, waving the smell away from his face. It didn't help much.

"Sorry about the smell," said Nie Hongyi. "Something must have gotten spoiled in the storage. It happens."

"It smells like a corpse," said Xue Yang.

"And how do you know what a corpse smells like, little guy?" asked Nie Hongyi humorously. "You are a bit too young for night hunting."

"I robbed a corpse once," announced Xue Yang proudly. "All the cowards were too scared, but I wasn't!"

"Why would they be scared?" asked Wei Ying. "Did they think it would turn into a fierce corpse? It won't happen with a fresh body."

"Where did you find these kids?" asked Nie Hongyi, his tone both amused and incredulous.

"Begging on the streets."

"That explains it."

As they followed the main road through the fortress they came upon two disciples carrying a wooden crate. They stopped to greet the Sect Leader, putting the crate down on the road.

"Shouzong, Feigong," greeted Nie Hongyi. "When you are done with this task, check on Elder Zhenren. He seems to be having trouble."

Shen Jiu filed away the name. Whatever the smell was, it clearly wasn't spoiled food.

The paved road ended at the rim of a fighting pit, a deep, stone-lined crater with an elevated platform in the centre, currently empty. Below, dozens of shirtless figures moved in fierce unison, their drills a militaristic dance.

The sight was barbaric, but that wasn't what Shen Jiu focused on. Usually, he needed to concentrate to feel resentment, but just like at the Burial Mounds, here it was so strong it was almost palpable. The ground itself seemed to roar mournfully, making him shiver.

"Wow! That's amazing," said Wei Ying, coming dangerously close to the edge of the pit. Even if he could feel the resentment, it didn't seem to faze him.

"Mingjue!" hollered Nie Hongyi. "Come greet your old man properly!"

One of the shirtless figures separated from the neat row of disciples and walked to the rim of the pit.

"Let me introduce you to my eldest," said Nie Hongyi jovially.

Shen Jiu expected to see a mirror image of his shidi. With the name sounding the same and the similar personality, it seemed obvious to him that the young man had to look like Liu Qingge. Perhaps that's why seeing a stranger's face felt like a betrayal. As if Liu Qingge missed an appointment they had made, sending a replacement instead.

Nie Mingjue jumped out of the pit, landing next to his father with a heavy thud. Two heads taller than his father and built like an ox, the sect heir cut an impressive figure despite his young age. Steam rose from his naked shoulders, making him appear like a hero of folk tales of old.

Despite that, Shen Jiu, who remembered Liu Qingge's celestial beauty and peerless martial skill, found the boy lacking. Only Liu Qingge could manage to annoy Shen Jiu to this extent without having to appear in person.

"Welcome home, Father," said Nie Mingjue gruffly as he folded into a stiff bow.

"I found a new teacher for Huaisang. This is Madam Shen. Jiang Fengmian recommended her to me," said Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes. Did Nie Hongyi actually talk to Jiang Fengmian or was it simply a clever lie?

Nie Mingjue didn't seem surprised, so it was likely true that Nie Huaisang went through a lot of teachers. That would make Shen Jiu's presence as inconspicuous as possible.

"Please take care of my brother, Madam Shen," said Nie Mingjue, bowing once again. The contrast of stiff politeness with his shirtless form was humorous, but Shen Jiu would still prefer for the young man to put on some clothes.

"Madam Shen has her own disciples," added Nie Hongyi. "Yue Yao and Wei Ying don't know our ways but they have rather impressive knowledge. I'm sure you'll find a place for them during night hunts and training."

"Young Master Nie," greeted Meng Yao with a bow. Wei Ying echoed his brother.

Shen Jiu glanced at the boys briefly and was startled to see the mirror looks of wide-eyed admiration. What was there to be so impressed by? Nie Mingjue was no War God. Just a tall young man with particularly developed muscles.

"Where is your brother?" asked Nie Hongyi. "Isn't he supposed to be training?"

Nie Mingjue's already dour face became even more grim, "He had a stomach ache in the morning. I already banned him from having dessert this week."

"If it’s not his stomach, it’s his head, if it’s not his head, it’s his throat," grumbled Nie Hongyi. "Drag him to my study. If he complains, tell him I will give him the rod."

"But what if he is truly ill?" asked Nie Mingjue, a note of concern in his voice. "Last time I dragged him to training by force he threw up after a single set."

"Never mind. Return to your training. You’re too soft on him anyway," said Hongyi.

Nie Mingjue bowed to them politely once again before jumping back into the pit.

"That child is a mark of shame on our whole lineage," grumbled Nie Hongyi as he led them inside the main building. "Mingjue spoiled him, and now it’s a fight to make him do anything he doesn’t want to do."

"How is your child being spoiled a failing of your other child? Aren’t the children a reflection of their parents?" asked Shen Jiu, annoyed. He didn’t like to be involved in family quarrels, he had enough of that at Lotus Pier.

"Mingjue took charge of Huaisang’s rearing after his mother’s death. I didn’t see the need to interfere," said Nie Hongyi.

"And how old was he?" asked Shen Jiu. The young man looked no older than seventeen.

"Nine." Shen Jiu gave the man an unimpressed look. "Don’t look at me like that! There were plenty of nannies around, Mingjue just liked to be involved. That was a difficult time… I suppose he could have ended up worse. At least he is still alive."

Shen Jiu didn’t know what to say after hearing something so grim, so he remained silent.

They followed Nie Hongyi into the family wing of the estate. He marched up to one of the doors and opened it loudly, making the skinny child inside drop whatever wooden toy he had been holding onto the ground and scramble back with his hands raised in front of him in theatrical defence.

Nie Huaisang was rather pale and skinny, but clearly not ill in the slightest. Strangely enough, out of the two Nie brothers this pathetic one looked the most like Liu Qingge. That made the boy’s faux horror look even more ridiculous.

"Nie Huaisang!" roared Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu tensed on instinct. "What did I say about telling lies?!"

"Lies?" asked Nie Huaisang, blinking at them stupidly. "I don’t understand, Father. I really don’t…"

"You understand everything, you little fox! Don’t take me for your brother, I know your ways!" roared Nie Hongyi. It had been a long time since a loud male voice could make Shen Jiu flinch, but this was a close call. He clutched at the edges of his own sleeves in a helpless attempt to calm his nerves.

Meng Yao and Wei Ying moved slightly, standing in a way that shielded Shen Jiu from the rampaging Nie. He wondered whether they did it on purpose. It would be strange for it to be a coincidence, but he couldn't understand what reasoning there could be behind the gesture.

"Who are our guests?" asked Nie Huaisang, switching his demeanour from confused to curious. He knelt on the floor, adjusting his hair so it would fall on his shoulders neatly.

"Your new teacher and her disciples. I would've introduced you properly, but as usual you leave your poor father no face. Let's see how long it takes Madam Shen to give up on beating knowledge into that airy head of yours," grumbled Nie Hongyi. The fight seemed to go out of him, like a doused bonfire that hissed before going out for good.

They went through introductions once again.

"You're really beautiful," said Nie Huaisang suddenly, after giving Shen Jiu a studying look. "I have never had a beautiful teacher before."

Shen Jiu almost choked on his indignation. This was a level of cheek he could only ever take from Ning Yingying. Nie Huaisang, however, wasn't nearly as charming as she was.

"What use is beauty to an educator?" asked Shen Jiu, irritated.

"It's easier to pay attention when you have something beautiful to look at," said Nie Huaisang shamelessly.

Shen Jiu glared at the boy's father. Whoever he learned shamelessness from clearly hadn't been Nie Mingjue.

"He isn't wrong," said Nie Hongyi, shrugging.

Shen Jiu shook his head. "How is it that a street brat I picked up six years ago shows more courtesy than the second son of a sect leader?" he asked.

Wei Ying at least knew well enough to keep his mouth shut around strangers.

"I can only hope you can correct my failings as a father," said Nie Hongyi with a shrug. Shen Jiu couldn't get a proper read on him.

"A-Yao, A-Ying, inform Second Young Master Nie about my standards," said Shen Jiu curtly. "Sect Leader Nie and I have to discuss some particulars of our stay here. Xue Yang, behave."

"Why are you only telling me to behave?" complained the brat. Shen Jiu ignored him.

"I do love it when a woman knows what she wants," said Nie Hongyi, his former playfulness making an unwelcome return.

"This woman wants to be taken seriously."

"Turn right. My office is nearby."

The office was more orderly than Shen Jiu expected from a man like Nie Hongyi. He closed the door behind him, so their conversation wouldn't be overheard.

"Do you think that my former profession allows you to take liberties?" asked Shen Jiu, glaring at the Sect Leader.

Nie Hongyi's face quickly lost any traces of amusement. "What? My apologies, I was just trying to put you at ease. You seemed tense."

Shen Jiu choked on his outrage. "I'm not some stupid girl from a dancing troupe you can "put at ease"! If you want me to work for you, treat me with respect."

"I respect you! Do you think that I invited you only for your pretty face?" asked Nie Hongyi incredulously.

Shen Jiu crossed his arms. "How am I supposed to know? This could all be just a hare-brained scheme to get me into your bed."

"Why would I get in all that trouble for that alone? You are not even the type of woman I usually go for! I prefer my paramours taller!"

Shen Jiu froze with his mouth open, not knowing whether to feel offended or not. "As if you are the one to talk about height!" he finally said.

Nie Hongyi snorted, losing whatever defensiveness he had. "If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll stop. I really do need your help, you know?"

Shen Jiu took a deep breath to calm his raised temper. "Then let us discuss the particulars. What is the result you wish to achieve?" asked Shen Jiu, grasping the opportunity to change the topic to something less uncomfortable.

"Let's sit down," said Nie Hongyi warily. "How much did you figure out about our cultivation method?"

Shen Jiu sat down in front of the sect leader, thinking how much he could reveal without raising suspicion. "You use resentment. There is a powerful source of it inside your saber. It's also strong enough to have corrupted your training pit."

Nie Hongyi seemed surprised to hear it. "Really? I never noticed that, perhaps a purification ritual is in order. We conduct one every decade or so, but if you can feel it, it's clearly not enough."

"Is the disgusting smell from before connected to your cultivation method?" asked Shen Jiu. He knew it wasn't just rotten meat.

"There is a certain method to making our sabers," started to explain Nie Hongyi. "I can take you to see it with your own eyes later, but basically we put the cores of spiritual beasts inside the sabers. They have to be alive for the extraction, so the smell was from the beast's carcass."

Shen Jiu nodded. That was in line with what he had read in the book.

"That method has to have consequences."

Nie Hongyi gave a grim nod. "The beast's core seeks prey. Usually night hunts are enough to appease it, but the more you feed the beast the more it hungers. When it doesn't receive enough sustenance, it turns on its wielder, which with time leads to qi deviation."

"How do you keep something like that from the other sects?" asked Shen Jiu. He could see the cultivation world gleefully turning on the Nie if the secret became wildly known. Of course, the butchers couldn't wield proper cultivation, of course the source of their might was impure.

"Usually the Nie warriors keep night hunting till the very end, perishing in battle. Those who cannot fight anymore go to seclusion to keep it quiet. There are, of course, exceptions. The stronger the saber the more sacrifice it requires, and the Sect Leaders always have the strongest ones. My father perished when he was no older than sixty. There simply wasn't enough beasts to satisfy his saber."

"And what do you want from me?" asked Shen Jiu.

"Ideally a way to stop the qi deviations for good. If it's not possible, I'm ready to settle for more information about what exactly triggers the qi deviation and how to avoid it for longer. I was never afraid to die early, but I don't want the same to happen to my children."

"Perhaps then you shouldn't have given them sabers in the first place," said Shen Jiu.

Nie Hongyi shrugged. "That's their birthright. Just like this sect is. It's not something I can just take away from them because it pains me that they might not live long enough to see their grandchildren."

Shen Jiu couldn't argue with that. He himself could have taken Meng Yao to some village, living the rest of their lives in peaceful mediocrity. He didn't consider it seriously even for a moment.

"If I'm to conduct proper research, I require three things. First, I need access to all literature describing your cultivation method. Second, I need all the records of qi deviations that you have. And lastly, I will need to speak to people who have either suffered or witnessed a qi deviation," said Shen Jiu.

"Anything you need, you shall have. I'll arrange it. If you require anything else, simply tell me."

Shen Jiu nodded. "Good. As for Nie Huaisang… I want to have complete control over his education."

Nie Hongyi's eyes widened, "What? It was meant to be an excuse for your presence here, nothing else. You can just teach him some trifles that the scholarly types are so fond of and he will be happy."

Shen Jiu ground his teeth. No matter how annoying Nie Huaisang was it was understandable that he struggled to apply himself in a sect like this.

"I won't have my student shame me with ineptitude. If I am to be his teacher, I won't just do half of a job," said Shen Jiu. He didn't want to be known as a teacher of a man known for his uselessness, that he was certain of.

Nie Hongyi frowned. "Your diligence is commendable but your teachings will be wasted on Huaisang. He is…"

Shen Jiu interrupted, "You are currently squandering whatever potential he has. I will correct this."

"Potential? What potential are you talking about?" asked Nie Hongyi.

"There's sharp intellect masked by the floppiness. I can see it and I shall forge it into something superior. Your sect could use somebody who doesn't solve all the problems with violence," said Shen Jiu.

What had become of his life if he was now speaking in defence of a spoiled little lordling who had never worked hard in his life? A boy who was happy to let his brilliance rust away under the deliberately cultivated image of incompetence… Shen Jiu wasn't even sure he wouldn't wish to wring Nie Huaisang's neck himself after working with him for a while.

"You think we didn't try? I could tell we couldn't make a warrior out of Huaisang years ago. So I hired tutors to train him, so he could help the sect using his brains instead of muscles. Every tutor I hired said that the boy is hopeless: he doesn't do any assigned work and doesn't retain any information they tell him. We'd be better off if he was born a girl, at least then I could get a marriage alliance out of him!"

"I don't know those tutors you hired. They could be incompetent for all I know," said Shen Jiu stubbornly.

"If you're so determined to try, do it. But don't complain to me when he hides in the closet to skip your lessons. Even if there is something in between his ears, it's useless if he refuses to use it," said Nie Hongyi.

After they discussed all the other practicalities, Shen Jiu went back to fetch his children from Nie Huaisang's room. He found the three older children gathered around whatever wooden puzzle Nie Huaisang had. They were so absorbed, they didn't notice that Shen Jiu was standing in the doorway.

He used their distraction to better study the room of his newest disciple. While the initial design was sharp and severe, allowing for no frivolity, Nie Huaisang had done his best to fill the room with as many knick-knacks as possible. Some of them were tasteful, like a set of decorative fans depicting a mountain, a river, and a bamboo grove respectively. Others were mere children's toys, like the wooden ox that sat on one of the shelves.

Using the lack of supervision, Xue Yang had clearly perused Nie Huaisang's wardrobe. Out of all the children he was the only one who noticed Shen Jiu's return, so now Xue Yang was pretending to be fascinated with his own reflection in the bronze mirror. Shen Jiu, however, was no idiot.

He marched towards the brat and grabbed his arm. Just as he expected there was a silver hairpin tucked inside Xue Yang’s bandages.

"Where would you even sell it, you fool?" asked Shen Jiu, unimpressed.

"There are always people willing to buy something for cheap," said Xue Yang, not bothering to feign guilt.

Meng Yao immediately abandoned the puzzle, rushing towards them, his face pale. "A-Yang, why would you do that? You don't have to provide for yourself anymore!"

No matter how smart he was, Meng Yao was still a child with little life experience. He thought that giving a street brat a stable home would be enough to domesticate him. Shen Jiu, of course, knew better.

"I was just playing with it... I was going to put it back," lied Xue Yang, widening his eyes pathetically. It would do him well to learn from Nie Huaisang while they were here, that boy was a much better actor.

"You can keep it," said Nie Huaisang, absentmindedly. The puzzle in his hands was finally assembled. "It’s old, so I hardly use it."

Shen Jiu shamelessly took the opportunity not to deal with the situation. He would have to speak to Xue Yang about stealing later, but for now he would rather rest after the long road.

His eyes caught on the painting, hanging on the wall next to the wardrobe. A small grey black-headed bird with a long blue tail, sitting on a branch of a pine tree. There was a certain lack of formal training to it that he recognized from his own earlier work.

"Did you paint it, Nie Huaisang?" asked Shen Jiu, just to make sure.

"Yes. It's an azure-winged magpie. We see a lot of them when it's warmer. They like to eat pine nuts." Once Nie Huaisang started to speak of a topic that interested him, his voice became more confident.

"Do you hunt them?" asked Wei Ying, curiously.

Nie Huaisang turned to him, outraged, "Why would you kill something so beautiful? Of course, we don't hunt them."

"You have a good eye for colors and composition," said Shen Jiu.

Nie Huaisang blinked at him stupidly, clearly not knowing how to react.

Then Shen Jiu chose to change the topic: "Children, let’s see what quarters we have been assigned.”

"Huaisang was going to show us around. They have armory! And a forge for sabers!" said Wei Ying.

"He’ll have to do it tomorrow. We need to prepare for the welcoming feast," said Shen Jiu. The Nie might not care about appearances but he wanted to make the best possible impression.

Nie Huaisang brightened. "There will be a feast? They are always fun!"

Shen Jiu did not expect the feast to be any "fun" at all, and he was right. The noise alone was enough to make him wish he was deaf and the smell of roasted meat and alcohol was simply nauseating. He wished to leave as soon as they entered the hall.

They were given places of honor at the table with the main family. Wei Ying and Meng Yao flanked Nie Huaisang, however, Xue Yang, for whatever reason, decided to stick to Shen Jiu's side. With Xue Yang on his left and Nie Hongyi on his right, the feast promised to be particularly irritating.

"There was no need for… this," said Shen Jiu under his breath as he sat down after being formally introduced to the Sect.

"Of course there is need! Feasts are good for morale, and the sect is more likely to accept newcomers if their appearance is celebrated with wine and merriment," said Nie Hongyi.

Then the Sect leader stood up to carve the roasted pig that lay in the middle of the table. He dealt with it swiftly, dumping neat slices of meat into offered plates.

Shen Jiu picked at his food while he observed the feast shed its last pretense of propriety. The more wine the Nie had, the more rowdy they became. Shen Jiu even saw an arm wrestling match erupt at the outskirts of celebration.

"Can we leave now?" asked Xue Yang, after finishing his plate.

"The fun is only beginning. Just you wait," said Nie Hongyi jovially. He wasn't going easy on the wine and the shine in his eyes reflected that.

"Why aren't you bothering A-Yao and A-Ying?" asked Shen Jiu looking down at the gloomy brat.

"They have their new friend now," said Xue Yang, sullen.

Wei Ying and Meng Yao did seem absorbed by their conversation with Nie Huaisang who was just as elated as his father. Meanwhile Nie Mingjue looked as pleased to be there as Shen Jiu felt. He had barely touched the wine that his father had poured in his cup in the beginning of the feast.

One of the elders with a streak of grey in his hair stepped forward and began to sing a ballad, accompanied by the sound of erhu. Even the rowdies of the Nie quietened reverently. The song painted the glorious story of the exploits of the Nie ancestor, who slayed a hundred Yao in a single night before succumbing to his wounds.

Nie Huaisang took this opportunity to drag his brother into the conversation, asking him questions about the sect's history. Shen Jiu was appalled to see a hint of red on Meng Yao's cheeks.

After that a couple of disciples demonstrated some strange amalgamation of a dance and a duel, using their sabers as dancing prompts. This was enough to make the feast almost tolerable. Even Xue Yang watched with his mouth open.

Gradually the feast became even looser with people wandering around the hall and striking conversation. To Shen Jiu's relief nobody tried to speak to him, except Xue Yang, whose inane questions were easy enough to answer.

Once Shen Jiu felt that it was late enough for them to retire politely, he tried to make his excuses, using the children's young age in his favor.

Nie Hongyi was too drunk to be reasonable: "Do you have to leave? Wait till the drinking competitions start! You won’t see something like that outside Qinghe."

"I have a headache," lied Shen Jiu, wincing at the smell of alcohol in the man's breath. "And the children need to go to bed already. They have lessons tomorrow."

"Look at them! They are having fun!" said Nie Hongyi. Indeed, the children were talking animatedly among themselves.

Nie Mingjue must have heard them: "Father, it is late. If Huaisang doesn’t go to bed now he will sleep until noon," said Nie Mingjue. Throughout the feast he was mostly silent, not indulging in wine and clapping politely when it was appropriate.

"Ugh, I should have never sent you to study at Cloud Recess, Mingjue," lamented Nie Hongyi. "You were not any fun in the first place, but now you’re like a monk!"

Nie Mingjue ignored his father expertly, moving to speak to his brother who seemed visibly disappointed for his fun to be cut short.

"How did it happen that my eldest son is excellent in everything he does, but takes no enjoyment out of life, while my youngest only knows how to enjoy life, refusing to do anything useful?" babbled Nie Hongyi drunkenly.

"To me it seems that you take too much enjoyment out of life," said Shen Jiu, wrinkling his nose.

"You’re funny," said Nie Hongyi. "I don’t think I have met such an honest person before."

"I’m not honest. I simply don’t suffer idiots well," said Shen Jiu. He didn't wait for the answer, walking to collect his children.

Once Xue Yang and Wei Ying were safely in their rooms, Shen Jiu followed Meng Yao inside his room.

"Is something the matter, Mother?" asked Meng Yao, looking at him attentively.

"I just wanted to hear your thoughts on the Nie sect."

Meng Yao might have been only fourteen, but he was sharper than most adults and at times had a better understanding of social aspects than Shen Jiu did.

"They are certainly different from any sect we had seen before. It might be useful for us. Not all sects can accept A-Ying's unique perspective and A-Yang's… free spirit."

Shen Jiu nodded. "Speaking of Xue Yang, keep an eye on him. It's only natural for the brat like him to feel jealous of your attention and he might lash out if he feels strongly enough." He, of course, was speaking from experience.

"He doesn't seem to like Nie Huaisang," said Meng Yao. Shen Jiu noted the form of address. Those two seemed to warm up to each other quickly.

"It's hard not to look down on a lazy and spoiled son of a Sect Leader after you spent most of your life fighting for scraps," said Shen Jiu. "What do you think of him?"

"Of Nie Huaisang? He is easy to please and eager to make friends. I think he is lonely. He is also rather good-natured and well-versed in conversation so befriending him won't be a hardship."

"And what about his brother?" asked Shen Jiu pointedly. Meng Yao's smile froze on his face, trying to hide his reaction.

"I didn't have an opportunity to get to know Young Master Nie well enough to judge," said Meng Yao.

"You seemed rather impressed with him."

"He is impressive… as a cultivator I mean," added Meng Yao in haste. "He is really strong and hard working, but it doesn't get to his head. From what Nie Huaisang told me of him he is a very loving, but strict older brother."

"It's better that you stay away from him," said Shen Jiu coldly.

The smile fell off Meng Yao's face. "Is there any reason why?"

"It won't end well for any of you. He is not as flexible as you, it's inevitable that he will look at your cunning and see unrighteousness."

"Mother, we hardly know him, is it reasonable…"

"I know people like him. Stubborn, violent, seeing the world only in black and white. Your cunning, your creativity, they won't approve. They'll see it as something to correct or to

condemn you for," interrupted Shen Jiu. Meng Yao didn’t need a judgmental brute breathing down his neck, so better keep his distance.

"I appreciate your counsel, Mother," said Meng Yao. His face was neutral as he said it but he didn’t look Shen Jiu in the eye.

Shen Jiu could not tell how sincere he was being. He could only hope that Meng Yao would follow his advice.

Chapter 26: A lesson for the future.

Of course, Nie Huaisang was late for his first lesson.

Shen Jiu glared at the door, furious. He expected some push-back, but to be disrespected like this on the first day… Shen Jiu pushed his nails into the meat of his thigh, trying to keep himself together. He was the one who had volunteered to teach the spoiled brat, so he couldn't be mad at anyone but himself anyway.

The heavy footsteps in the hallway rumbled like thunder. Then the door opened with a bang. Nie Mingjue was so massive that he blocked most of the doorway, like a wall of muscle. Meanwhile, Nie Huaisang, safely hidden in his brother's shadow, almost went unnoticed. The second young master didn't seem eager to enter the classroom, so Nie Mingjue had to get involved once again, pushing his brother and making him stumble forward in an undignified manner.

"Our apologies for the tardiness," said Nie Mingjue with a stiff bow.

Shen Jiu's eyes immediately went to Meng Yao, who was looking at the intruder with a look of rapt attention. He didn't even notice that Xue Yang had lain down on the table with his eyes closed.

"You can leave now," said Shen Jiu, making a shooing motion with his hand. Nie Mingjue turned around to leave and Nie Huaisang scurried after him, like a wily cat.

Shen Jiu stood up and crossed the room in a few quick strides, catching the nuisance by the scruff of his neck. With his other hand he closed the door. "Where do you think you're going?" he asked dangerously, still holding onto Nie Huaisang's clothes.

The boy looked up at him, blinking stupidly. "I don't understand. Didn't you tell me that I could leave?"

"Huaisang sure is very brave," whispered Wei Ying loudly. Shen Jiu glared at him. Wei Ying was, of course, correct, but the lack of discipline wasn't appreciated.

"Stop playing stupid and take your seat," ordered Shen Jiu. "Today we are going to revise the basics of cultivation theory…"

Without Nie Mingjue to distract him, Meng Yao quickly woke Xue Yang up and even managed to make him sit in a dignified way. Meanwhile, Nie Huaisang hunched over his desk, like a man who had just been given a prison sentence.

"Nie Huaisang, can you tell me what qi is?" prompted Shen Jiu. He didn't know the boy's level, so he thought that the easiest question should go to him.

Nie Huaisang didn't answer, looking at Shen Jiu like a dead fish.

"Is he an idiot?" asked Xue Yang. "Even I know what qi is."

Shen Jiu gave the brat a sharp look. "Don’t speak out of turn. If you want to speak, raise your hand."

Xue Yang rolled his eyes, but raised his hand as requested.

"Alright, Xue Yang, explain how you understand the concept of qi."

"It’s the life force that fuels cultivation. Like blood, but invisible. Actually… if you draw all the qi out of a person, will he die?"

"Yes," said Shen Jiu. "Your definition is functional, but let’s expand on it…"

The lesson went on like this for some time. Nie Huaisang couldn’t answer even the basic questions and struggled to repeat the definitions after hearing them, so Shen Jiu ordered him to write everything down. However, when he glanced at the boy’s notes to check how he was keeping up, he saw a doodle of his own scowling face.

"Xue Yang," called Shen Jiu, trying his best to remain calm. "If Nie Huaisang doesn’t pay attention to the lesson, you are allowed to bite him."

Xue Yang immediately brightened, happy to have permission to cause violence. Bloodthirsty brat. Shen Jiu had brought him to the class only because he didn’t want to leave the little troublemaker to his own devices. However, Xue Yang, seven-years-old and illiterate, seemed to follow the lesson better than the privileged Nie Huaisang.

Nie Huaisang quickly turned pale. "Isn’t it a bit excessive?" he asked, his voice uncertain.

"No," said Shen Jiu coldly. "Now. Who can name the last stage of cultivation?"

The topic, of course, was below Meng Yao and Wei Ying’s level, but they seemed happy to answer Shen Jiu’s questions, giving their own definitions and examples. Shen Jiu was in the middle of explaining the importance of golden cores, when Xue Yang lunged with no words of warning. Nie Huaisang screamed bloody murder as he ran away.

"He actually tried to bite me! I’ll tell my brother!" wailed Nie Huaisang as he cowered behind Wei Ying’s back. Wei Ying made a fine human shield, keeping Xue Yang away with a wide grin on his face.

"Stop it, A-Yang, Shizun was just joking."

Shen Jiu didn’t know where the boy got this idea from. He closed his eyes, feeling the tension in his temples. He felt the coming headache from a mile away.

"Xue Yang, stop," said Shen Jiu. "It appears that you lot are in need of some physical exercise."

Nie Huaisang pouted. "Didn’t my father tell you that I’m useless at physical tasks? My health is too fragile. Perhaps we could do something less demanding…"

"I’m not here to entertain you. I’m here to teach you. So you will learn whatever I deem necessary," interrupted Shen Jiu. "Now, let us all go outside. You are permitted to fetch warmer clothes. A-Yao, make sure Nie Huaisang doesn’t get lost on the way."

While Shen Jiu waited for the children to get ready, he had ample time to consider his next actions. With the way this lesson had gone, he couldn’t imagine the practical one going any better. At the moment, Nie Huaisang, who had everything brought to him on a silver platter his whole life, had no idea why he needed cultivation. Shen Jiu would show him, the way he himself had been shown when he was a child.

He was thinking about how to better go about this particular lesson, when the children finished gathering around him. Without a word, Shen Jiu started walking, marching past the training pit.

"Aren’t we going to train?" asked Wei Ying, his face disappointed.

"For this lesson I want us to be closer to nature," said Shen Jiu cryptically.

Nie Mingjue, who must have noticed them walking past the training ground, ran to catch up with Shen Jiu. "Where are you headed?" he asked, trying to sound casual and failing entirely.

Shen Jiu didn’t stop walking even for a moment. "To the forest. Don’t follow us. Your attention will hinder your brother’s progress."

For a moment, Shen Jiu wondered whether he could get Nie Mingjue’s cooperation for this particular lesson. It would surely make it sink in better, but Shen Jiu doubted that Nie Mingjue would agree. He coddled his brother too much.

"You cannot just take Huaisang outside the Impure Realm without explaining anything!" barked Nie Mingjue, losing his temper quickly. Shen Jiu barely contained a flinch. The young man already had the lungs of a general.

"I’m simply going to give Nie Huaisang some incentive to pay attention to his lessons. We will be back quickly," said Shen Jiu. He could already see the ways Nie Mingjue would get in his way if he continued teaching Nie Huaisang.

"Brother, should I be outside in such weather?" asked Nie Huaisang pathetically. "I’ve just recovered from a cold, after all."

Nie Mingjue snorted, looking at Nie Huaisang’s heavily embroidered overrobe, more ornamental than useful."If you are so cold, you should have worn your warmest robe, not this one."

"Can we leave now, or do I have to seek your father for permission?" asked Shen Jiu impatiently.

"I will take you to the gate. The guards will need to be instructed to let you out anyway," said Nie Mingjue.

Shen Jiu could feel the sect heir's heavy gaze until they entered the pine grove, which wasn't far from the Impure Realm. The snow crunched under their feet, making the silence even heavier than it already was.

"Are we going to climb trees without our hands?" asked Wei Ying.

"Don't be ridiculous! Nie Huaisang would simply break his neck," said Shen Jiu.

"You can actually do that?" asked Xue Yang. Out of all of them he had the most trouble walking through the snow as it reached his knees.

Shen Jiu looked at Wei Ying and was struck by the thought that the boy could get in the way of his next lesson. "I don't have anything interesting planned, so why don't you show Xue Yang some of the different ways you can use qi? I don't want him to get bored," said Shen Jiu.

Wei Ying was only happy to have a reason to fool around, leaving Shen Jiu alone with Nie Huaisang and Meng Yao. He walked around, looking at the pine branches searchingly. Even in winter there had to be…

"Are we looking for something in particular, Mother?" asked Meng Yao, uncertain.

Shen Jiu ignored him, looking for any signs of movement.

As they went further into the grove, he finally heard flapping of wings and saw a small grey bird with a blue tail land on a tree branch. An azure-winged magpie. What luck it was for his lesson prop to be the exact same type of bird that Nie Huaisang seemed to favor.

Guided by his cultivation a green ribbon slithered out of Shen Jiu's sleeve, shooting at the bird. In one fluid motion the ribbon tied itself around the bird then, more slowly, it delivered the precious cargo into Shen Jiu's waiting palm. The bird's little heart was beating so quickly that Shen Jiu could feel it.

"You can do this with cultivation?" asked Nie Huaisang, his eyes wide open with fascination.

"Yes," said Shen Jiu. With his free hand, he took a knife out of his sleeve. It was a small blade, the one he used for cooking. However, even this modest blade looked gigantic when pressed against the bird's trembling chest.

"Mother?" asked Meng Yao quietly, his eyes questioning. Perhaps Shen Jiu should have explained his lesson to the boy, but Meng Yao was always so good at playing along that he didn't feel the need to.

"What do you need the knife for?!" asked Nie Huaisang, his voice ringing loudly. "Let it go! You are scaring it!"

"I'm going to cut this bird open. How are you going to stop me from doing that?" asked Shen Jiu coldly.

"What?" Nie Huaisang's eyes shone with tears. "I'll study! I promise to do all the work, just don't hurt it!"

"See. There is a weak, helpless thing about to be hurt, but you cannot save it because you have been too lazy to learn anything useful," said Shen Jiu.

"Please, don't…" begged Nie Huaisang tearfully, walking to Shen Jiu as if to plead with him. However, when he came close enough, he lunged. A pair of thin arms tried to wrangle the knife away from the bird.

It was a pathetic attempt all around. Shen Jiu didn't even need to use cultivation to keep his arm in place. How did this boy plan to survive in this world with such a pathetic body? Did he expect that somebody would always be there to protect him?

With an annoyed scoff, Shen Jiu tossed the bird away, grabbing Nie Huaisang by the hair instead. Putting the knife to his throat felt natural. Meng Yao gasped in horror, stepping forward as if to stop Shen Jiu.

"Are you insane!?" asked Nie Huaisang, his eyes terrified.

"Mother, is it…" started Meng Yao urgently.

"Quiet," commanded Shen Jiu, before turning his gaze to the boy in his grasp. "Weak," he said, his thoughts aloud. "You are too weak to protect the bird. Too weak to protect yourself… Do you expect that someone will always be there to save you?"

Shen Jiu couldn't believe that he used to be naive enough to believe the same.

"My brother…"

Your brother won't come for you, you idiot, so stop waiting!

"Your brother isn't here now! I could humiliate you, mutilate you, do whatever I want with you, and your brother won't be here to save you! You either save yourself or die!"

Shen Jiu's hand began to shake and he moved the knife away from the boy's throat lest he cut him by accident. He didn't plan to lose his cool like this. He had to take back control.

"What do you even want me to do?" asked Nie Huaisang desperately. "I'm useless! Even if I try, the result isn't good enough, so why do anything?"

Shen Jiu released the boy, allowing him to collapse on his hands and knees. "Don't give up before the fight. What if this fight is for your life? That's the only lesson that matters. Now stand up! I'll show you how to stand on your feet firmly, so you won't fall down this easily…"

He looked at the boy expectantly, waiting for him to stand up. Nie Huaisang didn't stand, sitting down in the snow as he sobbed.

"Didn't you hear me?" Shen Jiu asked.

"I want to go home!" Nie Huaisang wailed into his knees, muffling his words. "I don't want your lessons!"

"You little…"

"Mother, that's enough," said Meng Yao firmly, standing in front of Nie Huaisang's crumpled form. Shen Jiu felt a sudden wave of irritation. He was just teaching a lesson. He didn't even hurt the boy!

You either kill or be killed. This was something Wu Yanzi liked to say. That was the lesson everybody had to learn at some point in life. Nie Huaisang was just too sheltered to realize this simple truth…

Shen Jiu looked down at the crying child at his feet. This wasn't the plan. Actually, he didn't quite understand how his lesson had escalated to this... He felt faint.

The determination on Meng Yao's face changed to concern. Shen Jiu had no idea what he looked like. Nie Huaisang wouldn't stop crying… Why did he cry so loudly? Hadn't he learned that no one… Shen Jiu bit the inside of his cheek so hard that he could taste the metallic tang of blood.

He had to salvage it. He had clearly gone too far. "Perhaps this method is also not the best. Let me try another one then."

For a moment it seemed like Meng Yao wouldn't step aside, but he must have seen something in Shen Jiu's expression that assured him that there wouldn't be more threats. Shen Jiu stepped closer, kneeling so he would be at the same level as his student.

He tried to remember how to be gentle. Did he even know how?

"I'm not pushing you around because it brings me joy, you know?" Shen Jiu said quietly. "I can see that you are smart, that you have talent and a strength of will that can lead you to greatness. It pains me to see such potential buried under your sect's brutal ways…"

"You are the brutal one!" screamed Nie Huaisang, rubbing his face as he stood up. "You broke that poor bird's wing and you don't even care!"

The bird? Didn't it… Shen Jiu looked down and saw the bird hop around in the snow, trying to fly up. It managed to raise into the air for a short stretch, but then it fell down. He felt queasy. Shen Jiu couldn't remember doing that.

"I… didn't mean to harm it," he said quietly. Meng Yao stared at him with a frown. "We can take it back to the Impure Realm while it heals."

Nie Huaisang looked at the bird thoughtfully, "My father won't allow it. I tried to bring an injured bird home once, but he ordered my brother to feed it to the dogs…"

"Why would he do that?" asked Meng Yao incredulously. "He didn't strike me as… this kind of person."

Nie Huaisang brushed the snow off his robes with his hands. "He was drunk, and it was very loud. My brother took it away from his sight, but after it healed and we released it, he said that I couldn’t bring any more birds."

"He will agree if I say it’s for a lesson," said Shen Jiu as he stood up. It was easier to focus on practical matters.

Nie Huaisang nodded. "I suppose it’s a deal then. If you say that a lesson requires going to the city with me, I might even forget to mention it to my brother that you threatened me with a knife."

What a conniving brat! Shen Jiu was almost impressed.

They picked up Wei Ying and Xue Yang on the edge of the forest. The two of them had been playing around in the snow like a pair of foxes. Even Wei Ying picked up on the unspoken tension in the air, asking questions that nobody wanted to answer.

Nie Mingjue still hovered by the entrance when they came back. Shen Jiu imagined what would have happened if the sect heir had decided to follow them and had seen the mess of the lesson unfold. He could even have tried to murder Shen Jiu for the offence.

"Huaisang!" barked Nie Mingjue. "What happened? Why are your clothes wet?"

"It’s been terrible, da-ge!" whined Nie Huaisang. "Madam Shen made me do exhausting exercises, and now I’m sweaty!"

Nie Mingjue’s shoulders relaxed a bit, making him seem less stiff. "Good. And you should call her Master Shen. Don’t make it seem like you were raised in a barn! You know how to address your teachers."

"Master Shen said that I did a good job, so I can have the rest of the day off," said Nie Huaisang.

Shen Jiu opened his mouth to protest but paused before he could actually do so. Perhaps some lenience was required. He also felt like he needed to rethink his teaching strategy. This lesson was a disaster.

"Should I bite him?" asked Xue Yang, distracting him. Shen Jiu snorted, then shook his head. The brat made a surprisingly good attack dog.

"What is this?" asked Nie Mingjue suspiciously, having noticed the bird now wrapped in a piece of silk so it wouldn’t try to escape and hurt itself in the process. "Is it a bird? We talked about this…"

"I require the bird as a subject for our painting lessons," said Shen Jiu, fulfilling his side of the deal.

Nie Mingjue gave him a long look. Shen Jiu looked back, unimpressed.

"I will order the disciples to bring a cage to your room, Huaisang. We should have some in storage, the ones for messenger crows," said Nie Mingjue, and marched off.

Nie Huaisang brightened. Now it was almost impossible to say that he had had a hysterical fit earlier that day.

"You have messenger crows?" asked Wei Ying.

"I can show you where they are kept after I fix this one's wing," said Nie Huaisang.

"I can help you!" offered Wei Ying readily. "Yao-ge, will you come with us?"

Meng Yao shook his head. "I have something to discuss with Mother. But you should take A-Yang with you."

Xue Yang didn't seem to like the idea, and neither did Nie Huaisang. Wei Ying, of course, ignored their discomfort entirely. "Alright! Let's go, A-Yang."

"We have something to discuss?" asked Shen Jiu, feeling tired. He could guess what Meng Yao wanted to say.

"Yes," said Meng Yao quietly. "In private, please." His words were quiet, but there was a certain stubborn set to his chin that didn't promise anything good.

Shen Jiu led the way to Meng Yao's room, silently preparing for a difficult conversation. As soon as they were behind closed doors, Meng Yao turned to him, his eyes fearful.

"What's wrong with you today? He is the second young master of one of the five great sects. You can be executed for mistreating him![1]" whispered Meng Yao urgently.

Shen Jiu sighed. "Don't worry about it. Nie Hongyi needs me and Nie Huaisang is known for lying and exaggerating. In the worst case scenario, I'll lose my teaching position."

After the morning's disaster he wasn't even sure that continuing the lessons with Nie Huaisang was a good idea. He didn't like losing control this way.

Meng Yao narrowed his eyes. "Why are you so sure of your station here? Is… is Sect Leader Nie my father? Is that why you were against me…" Red spots appeared on his cheeks.

"What would make you think something so idiotic?" asked Shen Jiu incredulously.

"What other leverage could you possibly have on a Sect Leader? He wanted you in his sect. He said that you saved his life, but Xue Yang said that he didn't see anything like that happen… and he knew your real name…"

"You think every Sect Leader we come across is your father…" grumbled Shen Jiu.

"Because you don't tell me anything! I'm not a child anymore, but you still don't trust me."

Shen Jiu sighed. Meng Yao wasn't entirely wrong. "I've discovered a secret about the Nie sect's cultivation style. Nie Hongyi thinks I can help him with solving an issue they have."

"What issue?"

"It's not my secret to tell."

Meng Yao was silent for a long time. "Even if you are sure of your position here… I don't want you to treat Nie Huaisang this way again. It was uncalled for."

"I wasn't planning on it. It clearly didn't work," said Shen Jiu. He didn't want to admit that his lesson had gone out of hand.

"Why did you think it would work? He is clearly used to being intimidated."

"I… overreacted," admitted Shen Jiu. "I'll have to find a different approach."

He couldn't bring himself to ask for advice, but Meng Yao sometimes could tell what people wanted from him without a word being spoken. It was like some kind of third sense he had.

"From what I've seen of Nie Huaisang he requires a softer touch."

"You think everybody requires a softer touch," scoffed Shen Jiu.

Meng Yao ignored his comment. "Bargaining with him will yield better results than violence and threats."

"You might be… correct," said Shen Jiu.

Meng Yao gave him a look that could be read only as, "I'm right, and you know it."

"I have work to do," said Shen Jiu, switching the topic. "Keep an eye on the children. See to it that they don't blow anything up, and check Xue Yang's pockets. He has sticky fingers."

"I'll tell Nie Huaisang that you apologize for your behavior today and will be more considerate in the future," said Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu choked on air. "You… Fine! Do whatever you want!"

The boy was growing up, and now he thought he could manage Shen Jiu, filtering him to be more palatable. It reminded Shen Jiu of Yue Qingyuan so much that it made his teeth ache. The man might not actually be Meng Yao's father, but they sure were alike.

After the conversatIon, Shen Jiu retreated to the office that was attached to his rooms. There were no judgemental eyes there, no responsibility, only the chaotic stacks of dusty books and old records. The smell of paper and ink always improved his mood, and the rustle of pages in the silence was a balm for his frayed nerves.

He started with cultivation manuals, looking for any important detail Nie Hongyi could omit in his summary. There wasn't anything of note, so he moved on to medical records. They

were extensive and quite predictable, however, there were several unusual cases: young men succumbing to qi deviations, with no clear reason to. Shen Jiu was compiling their names when Xue Yang burst into his office.

"What do you want?" asked Shen Jiu, not looking up from the paper. He wrote down the name of the man who died in his thirties around five years ago.

"Yao-ge and Ying-ge are now loyal lap dogs, going where Nie Huaisang takes them. He brought them to see some stupid painting his dead mother made. You can paint much better, though you refuse to use colours for some reason," said Xue Yang as he studied the books on Shen Jiu's table. He couldn't read, so it wasn't a big deal if he saw anything classified.

"As if you could tell whether a painting is good or not," said Shen Jiu. If he kicked the brat out, he would certainly find trouble. There had to be a way to occupy him…

Shen Jiu found a piece of clean paper and set it in front of Xue Yang, handing him a brush and some ink, already ground.

"If you insist on invading my space, you might as well learn something useful. Hold the brush like this," Shen Jiu waited for the brat to copy his hold and nodded. "Do you know how to write your name?"

"Yao-ge showed me how."

"Demonstrate." Shen Jiu watched the boy's clumsy movements. The end result was readable, but… "You make your strokes in the wrong order[2]. Look. This one should come first, then this one…"

"But why is it important?" asked Xue Yang, squinting at Shen Jiu's movements. "People can understand it either way."

"It's faster if you do it this way, and there is less risk of the ink smudging. Also, it will be important when we move on to proper calligraphy…"

Teaching Xue Yang wasn't as annoying as Shen Jiu expected it to be. The boy practiced diligently while Shen Jiu worked and only said something when he ran out of paper. Once Shen Jiu was pleased with the way Xue Yang wrote his name, he demonstrated the numbers from one to ten.

"That's the first thing I learned how to write," said Shen Jiu absentmindedly.

"Not your name?" asked Xue Yang.

"I didn't have a proper one yet. I learned how to write my number, and the number of my… friend," said Shen Jiu. It felt strange to tell somebody that. He wondered how many Lore points this confession would gain him.

"You were a slave!?" asked Xue Yang, nearly spilling the ink.

"Be louder about it, would you? Let the whole Impure Realm hear you…" grumbled Shen Jiu, moving his books farther away from Xue Yang just to be safe.

"I thought you went to work at the whore house so you wouldn't starve, I didn't think you were sold. Did your parents sell you?"

"Probably. I was too young to remember," said Shen Jiu, returning to his work. It was strangely easy to speak to Xue Yang about this.

"I hope my parents are dead," said Xue Yang as he wrote his numbers in a row.

"It's likely that they are."

"That jerk Lao Ban said that my mom must've been a whore."

"She could have been," agreed Shen Jiu. "Raising a child in a brothel isn't easy."

"You didn't throw Yao-ge out, did you?"

"I didn't stay at the brothel either," shrugged Shen Jiu. "By the way, Xue Yang, don't think that you can tell anybody about my past. If asked, say that you don't know, or I'll have to cut out your tongue."

"As if I want to talk to any of the idiots here," scoffed Xue Yang, finishing his row of nines. Shen Jiu felt a tug at the corner of his mouth.

When Shen Jiu checked the Lore Point balance after Xue Yang had left, he finally reached five hundred. Another year or so and… He couldn't imagine what would actually happen. Would it even matter if Yue Qingyuan wasn't the one telling him the truth?

Sleep evaded him the whole night, his mind a buzzing beehive of thoughts. He kept thinking of his failure, analyzing everything that he did wrong. At five in the morning, Shen Jiu gave up on sleep. He put on his clothes and went out to distract himself with a short walk in the chill morning air.

The sky was still dark, only a small flicker of light on the horizon, so the shadow of a large man in the light of a torch was enough to make Shen Jiu tense. He only relaxed when he recognized Nie Mingjue.

"Madam Shen," he greeted with a bow. "Are you related to the Lan by any chance?"

"No relation," said Shen Jiu. At least it didn't seem like Nie Hongyi had spilled his secret. "I need to discuss something with you. Could you spare a moment?"

"Is it about Huaisang? What has he done?" The exasperation in Nie Mingjue's voice was comically paternal. Shen Jiu thought that perhaps Nie Huaisang decided to keep Shen Jiu's lesson to himself not just so he could blackmail him for favors. Perhaps the boy didn't think his father and brother would be on his side.

"I’m seeking alternative ways to grasp his attention. Has he shown any interest in learning something other than painting? Music, perhaps?"

Shen Jiu had a feeling that Nie Huaisang might be closed off after what happened in the forest, so he preferred to start his negotiation with leverage.

Nie Mingjue looked thoughtful for a moment. "Not music. After I went to study at Cloud Recesses, I hired Huaisang a Qin tutor. He kept complaining that his hands hurt and the music was boring, so Father let the teacher go."

"Anything else? No matter how fanciful or ridiculous."

"When Huaisang was little, he wanted to learn how to dance with fans. He would take his mother’s old fans and wave them around. I think he was imitating the dancing troupes our father likes to invite." Nie Mingjue winced after mentioning his father’s proclivities.

That… could actually work. Although they would have to keep it a secret. "That will be useful, thank you," said Shen Jiu. "You don’t have to bring Nie Huaisang to class this morning, I’ll do it myself."

"Are you sure? He can be a real pain in the mornings…" said Nie Mingjue.

"I’m sure. I also have a favor to ask," said Shen Jiu. "From now on, I decided that our lessons with Nie Huaisang should be one on one. This way I can make sure he doesn’t get distracted. However, that would leave my other three disciples unoccupied. Could you find something to occupy them with?"

They agreed that Meng Yao and Wei Ying would be treated like guest disciples, going on night hunts and doing assigned tasks around the sect. Meanwhile, Xue Yang would join the youngest disciples, who mostly did physical drills and meditation.

By the time Shen Jiu went to fetch Nie Huaisang from his room, the sun’s rays reflected cheerfully off the stone walls. He took a deep breath before knocking on the door. There was no reaction. He knocked louder.

"I’ve already said I’m feeling under the weather, so I don’t need breakfast," whined the voice from behind the door. Nie Huaisang put on his best impression of a dying maiden.

"I’m not a servant. Open the door before I break it," said Shen Jiu, and winced. He had planned to play nice.

"I’m not dressed," said Nie Huaisang. "And I’m sick." He even dared to fake a cough.

"I’m not here to drag you to a lesson. I’m here to negotiate your lesson plan," said Shen Jiu, already tired of this spectacle.

Nie Huaisang opened the door with his robes on and no sign of illness on his face. Shen Jiu didn’t comment as he walked inside the room. There was now a rather crude cage standing in the room, the blue-tailed bird sitting inside. Its wing was wrapped in white gauze,

"I suggest we negotiate a contract. One that would benefit both of us," said Shen Jiu, not one to beat around the bush.

"What contract… I don't think I understand…" said Nie Huaisang, playing with his sleeve.

"While I'm in charge of your training, I can offer you multiple benefits: you won't be forced to participate in any physical training your sect is known for, you will be able to choose your subjects to a certain extent and if you work well I might even offer some boons, such as trips to the market."

"You will make me exercise harder than my brother. I know teachers like you. You push until everything hurts, and you don't listen."

"I cannot promise not to be demanding, but I have already decided that traditional physical training won't work for you, so I found an alternative."

"An alternative?"

"I will teach you how to dance with fans. This art requires rigorous training, and achieves roughly the same objective: you will train your body and learn how to move swiftly and gracefully without losing your balance."

"Father said only women dance with fans [3]," said Nie Huaisang, but Shen Jiu noticed a sparkle of interest in his eyes.

"He doesn't have to know. We will keep our lessons private," said Shen Jiu.

"But what would you get out of it?" asked Nie Huaisang suspiciously.

"You might choose what arts you receive tutelage in, but cultivation training is not negotiable. You will meditate and learn cultivation theory with me. We can decide how you will be rewarded for your success in cultivation together." The more Shen Jiu spoke, the more he felt confident about his new approach.

"But that doesn't answer my question. What benefit do you personally get out of it?" asked Nie Huaisang. Shen Jiu noted the steel in his eyes.

"Nothing. In fact, I could have taught you frivolous things and called it a day. Your father would be satisfied with it. However, there is a certain satisfaction in guiding a disciple to their full potential."

He didn't understand this sentiment before Meng Yao and Wei Ying. Before them, Shen Jiu saw his disciples as rivals, making sure that they wouldn't outshine him. Now he took pride in his students' success.

Nie Huaisang gave him a long look. "I don't really understand you, but… I want to try. But if you are mean to me again, I will tell my father that you have been stealing from me."

Shen Jiu blinked, remembering the silver hairpin. He had forgotten to educate Xue Yang about stealing, so it was likely that it was now not the only possession of Nie Huaisang that

Xue Yang had taken. If Shen Jiu was a regular teacher, this approach could actually work.

"Good try. We will work on your threats as well," said Shen Jiu.

Nie Huaisang blinked at him owlishly.

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[1] Not an exaggeration. Nie Hongyi could execute his son's teacher for mistreatment and not even Jiang Fengmian could protest officially.return to text ↩

[2] Learning the stroke order is a fundamental skill for Chinese calligraphy. Changing the order is a severe mistake and also a lack of discipline.return to text ↩

[3] Men actually could dance with fans in opera houses, for instance, but it's still not something that a son of a sect leader could proudly enjoy doing. In some ways the situation can be compared to a 19th century son of a noble man wanting to learn ballet professionally. The fans themselves are not gendered but the dance itself is.return to text ↩

Chapter 27: The Nie brothers.

Huaisang could feel the tickle of sweat as it dripped down his forehead. His legs trembled as he held the pose, and his whole body ached. Wrung out, he finally lowered his arms and straightened his legs. Part of him wanted to lie down on the floor and never stand up again.

"I did not give you permission to stop," said Shen Shi, her voice bitingly cold. Huaisang didn't look at her, not wanting to see the glare he could feel burn holes in him. He had yet to figure out when her bark could lead to bite and that made her unpredictable. In Huaisang's experience unpredictable adults were far more dangerous than angry ones.

"I'm all sweaty and everything hurts," Huaisang complained, not bothering to play it up. Unlike his brother and father, this woman had no pity in her. "Does it even count as a dancing lesson if all I do is stand in different poses?"

"These poses are your root," said Shen Shi as she moved closer to him. Huaisang stepped back before she was close enough to touch him. He didn't want her to grab him again, still remembering the feeling of the cold knife against his throat.

Shen Shi stopped. "Now you're easy to throw off balance. One push and you will fall."

"I still need a break," said Huaisang as he wiped his forehead with his sleeve. Luckily, he had the foresight to put on the robes he wouldn't feel bad about if they got dirty. He wasn't sure he'd ever felt so tired. If this were saber training, he would have "fainted" a long time ago.

"Fine," said Shen Shi in a low voice. Huaisang dared a glance at her face and saw displeasure mar her beautiful features. It happened quite often, which was a waste. "You wanted to learn more painting so let's do that."

What happened next was the most interesting lesson of his life. Huaisang had always paid great attention to art and tried to copy the works he liked. After a lot of trial and error he could even depict birds and objects with close likeness. However, there was a multitude of things he had no idea about and now it seemed like he had an endless well of knowledge available to him.

Brush techniques he had never seen, colors that he didn't know how to mix, styles he had only ever read about in books he had begged his brother to buy… it felt like Huaisang would never run out of questions to ask. And Master Shen seemed to know an answer for anything!

"Try to repeat one of your earlier paintings, but use the advice I gave you," said Master Shen as she stood up from her place.

She stopped frowning at the very beginning of the painting lesson, pleased by Huaisang's attentiveness. Now her face looked gentle and her voice wasn't cold, so Huaisang was no longer awaiting an attack in her every move. Like his father, Master Shen wore different faces. He would simply have to learn how to behave around each of them.

"Is the lesson over already?" asked Huaisang, feeling a strange sense of loss. Like he was being dragged away from a feast, not a lesson.

Master Shen gave him a strange look. "We agreed that our lessons would end before lunch time, didn't we?"

Huaisang did press for that when they had agreed on the rules. Now he felt regret, but he wasn't going to beg her to come after lunch. It could very well be a trick. He wasn't going to give in to the temptation, when it could end with him trapping himself in more unwanted obligations.

"Thank you for the lesson, Master Shen," Huaisang said sincerely.

She made a disrespectful sound with her tongue, startling him with her rudeness. Shen Shi really was a strange woman. Beautiful like a rare flower from the emperor's garden, she had the temper of an old shrew selling vinegar at the market. There was an appeal in such contrast, but it was jarring all the same.

Usually, Huaisang had his meal brought to his room. He disliked the communal dining hall: its noise, its mess, its judgment. However, now that Huaisang had people to share the meal with, the place didn't seem as unappealing as before.

Wei Ying waved at him as soon as he saw him from his place at a long table surrounded by other disciples. He seemed to get along with the others well.

"Come here, Huaisang, I saved you a place!" hollered Wei Ying, making some people turn around. Soon there would be rumors that the newcomer and the useless second son were friends.

"Is Yue Yao not with you?" asked Huaisang as he sat down next to Wei Ying.

"Your brother snatched him away this morning," complained Wei Ying. "Took him on a night hunt. I wanted to go too, but he said I was too young! Can you believe it? Yao-ge is only a year older than me!"

Huaisang was surprised to hear that. He thought that Yue Yao was at least two or three years older than them. He had this older brother energy that reminded Huaisang of Da-ge, despite the two of them being as different as the golden eagle and the red-billed leiothrix[1].

"Well, Da-ge probably knows best. He has been arranging night hunts for years," said Huaisang. He personally dreaded the moment he would be old enough for night hunts. With his cultivation level, he'd be little more than a monster's chew toy.

"Yao-ge and I started training in the same year," said Wei Ying as he shovelled meat onto his plate. "And I got my golden core on the same day as him!"

"You already have a golden core?" asked the disciple sitting on Wei Ying's left.

"Got it right before we came here actually," bragged Wei Ying.

The disciples around them expressed their admiration. Neither of them had their golden cores yet as far as Huaisang knew.

"Isn’t he the same age as Nie Huaisang?" whispered somebody loudly. They didn’t even care if he overheard? Why would they? The only thing Huaisang could do was complain to his da-ge, who would say "if you work hard, they won’t have any reason to talk" and do nothing.

Huaisang didn’t care much about such comments anymore. He had heard them all and they weren’t untrue. It just annoyed him that people couldn’t understand a simple truth. Why did he have to strive for heights in the sphere he couldn’t care less about? What business of theirs was it that he didn’t care to be strong and powerful?

"My Shizun says that it doesn’t matter when you get your golden core. Rushing it can only make you weak in the long run," said Wei Ying wisely. Then he frowned at the piece of meat he had just eaten. "Do your cooks even know what spice is? It wasn’t that bad at the feast!"

The conversation moved on to the differences between Yunmeng and Qinghe and Huaisang felt relieved by the shift. He even managed to have several relatively nice interactions with the Nie disciples, which was rare.

After the meal, Huaisang wanted to show Wei Ying the stables. However, on their way there they came across the sullen little nightmare skulking around. Wei Ying immediately had to check on Xue Yang, so their plans were derailed. Huaisang did not enjoy, in the slightest, no longer being the youngest person in the group.

"How were your lessons, A-Yang?" asked Wei Ying, tugging at the sullen boy’s ponytail.

Xue Yang slapped his hand away with a snarl. "Go away! It’s not like you care."

Wei Ying’s eyes widened. "Of course I care! Did something happen? If somebody is bullying you, we can go to Shizun. She won’t stand for it!"

Wei Ying seemed strangely confident in his teacher’s good character. Huaisang wondered whether he had truly never seen the cold, scary side of hers.

"She will find out anyway. They say I can’t come to the training anymore," said Xue Yang.

"What did you even do?" asked Wei Ying. He seemed more curious than outraged. If Huaisang had gotten himself banned from the training in a day, Da-ge would have had his head. Perhaps it was different when the people weren’t related.

"I didn’t do anything!" said Xue Yang aggressively. Huaisang stepped back, remembering his sharp teeth. "They ran their stupid mouths all morning, but the moment they saw a knife they started crying like little babies! It’s not my fault they are weak!"

Huaisang wasn’t surprised that this little bandit had found his place under Shen Shi’s wing. Those two seemed to be made of the same cloth.

"A-Yang," chided Wei Ying. "We told you to leave the knife under your pillow in the morning!"

What was wrong with those people?

"How else am I supposed to protect myself!?" shot back Xue Yang.

"What did they even say to deserve being threatened with a knife?" asked Wei Ying.

"They said I can't fight well with no finger and that I'm stupid because I can't read," said Xue Yang. Huaisang suddenly felt bad for him. Xue Yang might be unpleasant and annoying, but Huaisang knew better than most how judgmental people could be.

"We could teach those bullies a lesson about being nicer to people," said Huaisang thoughtfully.

Wei Ying and Xue Yang both looked at him, surprised. "The bitch said that I can't hurt anyone here," said Xue Yang sullenly.

Huaisang choked on air. The… what!? The word certainly fit her, but to hear something so crude out of a child's mouth! That Xue Yang was an odd one.

"Don't call Shizun that!" said Wei Ying loudly. "She stopped calling you beast and vermin, didn't she?"

But truthfully, what was wrong with those people?

"I was thinking of something more like a prank," explained Huaisang.

"That's a great idea!" said Wei Ying, smiling widely.

It wasn't Huaisang's first time doing something like that. There were times when he still cared about what people said, so he learned some ways to get revenge without implicating himself. With six hands, gathering the materials went faster.

First they got to the chicken coop, their appearance making the poor birds squawk loudly and scramble in fear. Both Wei Ying and Xue Yang seemed to delight in the chaos, laughing while they gathered the eggs and the stray feathers. Xue Yang suggested gathering the chicken excrements, but Huaisang vetoed the disgusting idea.

"The younger disciples end their training first, so we have to hurry," said Huaisang quickly. He still remembered the days when he was forced to train with the rest. That hadn't lasted long, but he still remembered their schedule.

Once they were in the right place they cracked the eggs onto any garment they saw, sprinkling the resulting mess with feathers for a creative flourish.

They did their best to stifle their laughter until they were away from the scene of the crime. Then they could finally indulge.

"You are not so bad for a noble man's son," concluded Xue Yang, looking at Huaisang with eyes far too piercing for a seven-year-old.

"This is not the first time you've done something like that, is it?" asked Wei Ying, clapping Huaisang on the shoulder. His touch was less heavy than Da-ge's.

"Last time I covered somebody's saber with tar," confessed Huaisang. That disciple dared to speak badly of Da-ge of all people. As if Da-ge didn't spend every minute of every day doing what was best for this sect.

"I actually haven't gotten to do anything this fun in a while," said Wei Ying regretfully. "Last time I put live frogs in some idiot's bed."

"Huaisang did something like that when he was little." Huaisang turned around quickly, startled by his father's sudden appearance. "Put a frog in my shoe, didn't you?"

His father had his arms crossed over his chest, looking at them knowingly.

It was second nature for Huaisang to read his father's moods. Most of the time he was happy: that was the best time to ask him for things, he would agree most of the time even if it went against Da-ge's decision. A lot of the time, Father was angry, which meant Huaisang had to bear it, until Father got it all out. He was like Da-ge in those moments, loud but not scary. Rarely, Father was quiet. That was the most dangerous one. That meant that Huaisang had to make himself scarce.

This was a happy Father so Huaisang wasn't worried in the slightest. "You broke my doll. It was revenge," he said haughtily, earning his father's laugh.

"It's not my fault I've got such big hands," said Father jokingly. He put his hand on Huaisang's head.

"Stop! You'll mess up my hair!" complained Huaisang, trying to shove his father's hand away.

"You've got a chicken feather stuck in it," said Father seriously.

"What? Get it out!" said Huaisang. He hoped he got no egg in his hair. That would be disgusting.

Father finally lifted his hand. "I should punish you three for messing around, but I'm too old and important to bother with it, so it's your lucky day. Xiao Yang, I'll assign you a private tutor. Try not to scare off this one, will you?"

"I don't want a tutor," said Xue Yang sullenly.

"That's not up to debate. You need to learn, and Madam Shen is too busy with important things to teach you," said Father. "Be good and I might even give you a couple lessons myself."

Huaisang looked at his father, startled. It was a strange attitude to have towards a mere teacher and her disciple. Why was she "too busy" when Huaisang knew for a fact that she had no lessons after lunch? And why was Father taking such a personal interest in her family?

There was definitely a secret here. Huaisang loved nothing more than figuring out secrets.

The obsequious village elder would not stop praising their work. Mingjue ground his teeth, resisting the urge to cut the flowery speech short.

"As a token of our gratitude, take this," said the elder, extending a decorative pillow with an ornate dagger on it. It was encrusted with precious stones, but clearly was more ornamental than functional. Huaisang would like it.

"You have already paid for our services," said Nie Mingjue. "I cannot accept more."

"This is not payment. It’s a gift of gratitude," said the elder, bowing so low that his head was parallel to the pillow he was holding out.

"You should sell it and give the money to the widow. We failed to save her husband from the beast, after all. Now excuse me, I have to check on my men."

The elder couldn’t say much more before Nie Mingjue marched outside, heading for the beast carcass that seemed to have gathered most of the village around it. Nearby, someone had at least done the decent thing and covered the victim's body with a cloth.

When Nie Mingjue approached, Nie Feigong was about to cut the beast’s stomach open with his saber. Nie Mingjue lunged, intercepting the slash with Baxia. "What are you doing?!" he asked.

Feigong lowered his saber. "Old man Zhenren needs beast ribs," he said with a shrug.

"You can’t contaminate the land this close to the village! Drag it away before you deal with it!" Nie Mingjue wondered when he would finally have a man under his command with a lick of common sense.

"Yes, Shixiong," said Feigong.

"Have you made sure that the survivors don’t require medical attention?" asked Nie Mingjue, addressing the disciples as a whole.

"I think the new guy dealt with them," said Li Guzhi, scratching the back of his head.

The only person he could be referring to was Yue Yao, the son of Huaisang’s newest teacher. Nie Mingjue looked around for the slight figure but couldn’t find him among the disciples.

"And where is he now?" he asked, annoyed. Yue Yao was barely older than Huaisang, so he was instructed to follow orders and not get in the way. It was the usual procedure when getting the young disciples used to night hunts. First, they watched and did small errands, then they gradually became involved.

"Are you looking for the pretty one?" asked one of the gawking villagers, a young woman about Nie Mingjue’s age.

Nie Mingjue tried to remember whether Yue Yao could be considered pretty. He was cute for a kid, big eyes and all. His face was rather symmetrical. "Yes?"

"He took Hu Qi home. She is the wife of the one who… you know," said the woman, her face turning grim for a moment.

Whatever annoyance Nie Mingjue had felt drained away. Yue Yao might have gone against his orders, but he was doing the task other disciples were too distracted to do. "Where does she live? Show me the way."

Yue Yao's initiative and thoughtfulness were commendable. However, dealing with the people whose loved ones died in a night hunt was too difficult for an inexperienced disciple to do alone, so Nie Mingjue needed to make sure everything was alright. The young woman took a strange interest in Nie Mingjue's personal life, asking him how he spent his free time and what his home was like.

Nie Mingjue entered the widow's house expecting to hear cries or accusations. To his surprise, the scene he saw was quiet, almost peaceful. The widow's face was still stained with tears, but she was calm now, drinking tea while Yue Yao spoke gently to her. He had a small child in his arms, who was chewing at his hair with a pensive expression on his chubby little face.

"Young Master Nie!" gasped Yue Yao upon noticing him. He gave a small, aborted jerk as if to bow, but the child in his arms didn't allow for that.

"Shixiong[2]," corrected Nie Mingjue. With the situation well in hand before his arrival, he felt like an intruder. "Madam, I'm sorry that we weren't fast enough to save your husband."

The woman's eyes began to well with tears again, and the child started to fuss as if feeling his mother's mood. Yue Yao soothed the baby, darting quick glances at Nie Mingjue as if expecting something.

"Will… the monster come again?" asked the widow.

"Not this one. Other ones might, though it's unlikely," said Nie Mingjue. The widow's face turned pale.

"I will give you a talisman. It will scare away bad spirits," said Yue Yao quickly.

Nie Mingjue frowned at the talisman Yue Yao handed the woman. It could keep a minor ghost or a fierce corpse out of the house, but not something truly powerful. He looked at the widow's trembling shoulders and decided against mentioning it. Sometimes fear could do more damage than the fiercest monsters.

"Do you have somebody who could stay with you so you wouldn't be alone tonight?" asked Nie Mingjue after Yue Yao instructed the widow on talisman usage.

"I'm not sure…" said the woman as she took her child away from Yue Yao. Nie Mingjue would have to talk to the village elders and ensure she would be taken care of. The way she

clutched at the child made Nie Mingjue's heart ache. If only they were faster, this wouldn't have happened.

"Yue Yao, finish up here and join the others at the edge of the village. We are going to set camp for the night," ordered Nie Mingjue as he left the house. It seemed that Yue Yao knew what he was doing.

This incident had almost escaped Nie Mingjue's mind entirely. He spent the whole evening making sure that the disciples disposed of the beast's carcass correctly, while overseeing the building of the camp. He was in the middle of debating how to transport the beast's head - its teeth and horns were valuable but its qi blocking properties made it impossible to store in a qiankun pouch - when he overheard laughter.

"That's probably the deadliest blade he has ever held," said Nie Shouzong loudly.

"Don't be mean, Shouzong! Not all people have talent for real cultivation," said Ling Dingchuan.

Nie Mingjue lifted his head, feeling his blood boil. He despised hazing and was always quick to put a stop to it. Now he was ready to remind Ling Dingchuan that his own forms were weak for his age, and he should spend less time running his mouth and more time training.

"It's a pity he is not a girl. He would make a fine wife with such fine cooking skills," said Li Guzhi.

Nie Mingjue looked in the direction of the fireplace, noticing the frozen back of Yue Yao, who had clearly been tasked with making their evening fare. He had undoubtedly heard every mocking word.

"Have you seen his mother?" Nie Shouzong asked. Nie Mingjue felt the blood pulse in his temples.

"You dare mock a person preparing your food!?" roared Nie Mingjue, walking closer to the laughing group. "Then you can make do without a meal today! You did nothing to deserve it. All you did today was shame our sect with your conduct! Now get out of my sight!"

The disciples scrambled, knowing better than to argue with him when he was angry. Nie Mingjue looked down at Yue Yao's frozen form. The boy was gripping the knife handle so tight his knuckles turned white.

"I apologize on behalf of my sect mates," said Nie Mingjue. It pained him that this was the first impression Yue Yao got of the Nie sect. It truly was shameful.

"It was just words," said Yue Yao softly. "But thank you for your interference."

Nie Mingjue nodded and went back to finish his orders. However, when Yue Yao was passing around the stew, Nie Mingjue made a point of thanking him loudly as he took his share. It was a hearty meal and proof of valuable skill.

After the meal was over, Nie Mingjue picked up the cooking pot. He figured it would do his sect mates some good to see that honest work wasn't below anyone, even the sect's heir. Yue Yao tried to stop him, voice shaking with nerves.

"A good leader should lead by example. That's what my father says," said Nie Mingjue, evading feeble attempts to fend off his help.

"You could have made Li Guzhi, Ling Dingchuan, and Nie Shouzong clean up instead," said Yue Yao quietly, when they were alone.

"That would make this task seem like punishment," explained Nie Mingjue as he carried the dirty pot laden with bowls to the spring. Yue Yao followed him, so short that he almost had to run not to lag behind. Nie Mingjue slowed down slightly.

"You are a good cook," Nie Mingjue said, remembering the taste of the stew.

"Jiang Yanli taught me. She is a good friend of mine."

Nie Mingjue remembered the sickly girl, trailing behind her father during a discussion meeting. He didn't talk to her much, but she seemed sweet. It made sense for her to befriend somebody like Yue Yao.

"That's right. You used to live at Lotus Pier," said Nie Mingjue. He didn't pay too much attention to his father's introduction, used to new teachers coming and going. Huaisang seemed to like this one though, and he certainly seemed to enjoy her charges' company. It was nice to see Huaisang surrounded with friends for a change.

"For three years, yes."

"Is there any reason they didn't give you a spiritual sword there?" asked Nie Mingjue, and immediately cringed at his own bluntness. To occupy himself he grabbed a rag and started scrubbing.

"Wei Ying and I formed our golden cores only after we left Lotus Pier, so there wasn't an opportunity to make proper arrangements," said Yue Yao stiffly. He crouched at the other side of the spring, washing the dirty bowls.

"I would offer you our sabers, but you'd have to relearn everything you have learned before," said Nie Mingjue.

Yue Yao looked up at him, his eyes earnest. "I wouldn't mind learning some of your moves. There is a certain benefit in learning something completely different. Though I'm certain you cannot teach those things to outsiders."

Nie Mingjue looked at him thoughtfully. The boy was still growing, but he had a lithe frame. With his sleeves pulled back, his lean muscles were obvious. "It's not forbidden to show you the basics. I can teach you some after we are done here."

Yue Yao lit up as he heard that, his smile bright. Nie Mingjue wished Huaisang had the same reaction at the thought of training. "I'd be happy to learn," he said.

Nie Mingjue looked down at the pot, pleased with the development. Teaching Yue Yao personally would help him feel accepted after the ugly display from before.

Nie Mingjue only understood the issue when they headed for an empty field: they hadn't brought training sabers on the night hunt. He could postpone, but Yue Yao seemed so eager at the opportunity to learn that it felt cruel to dim his smile.

Nie Mingjue put his hand on Baxia’s hilt and felt a soft wave of protective warmth. It was less potent than what she felt towards Nie Huaisang but still similar. It seemed that giving Baxia to Yue Yao wouldn’t be a problem, though it felt strangely intimate to hand her over like that.

He expected to have to adjust Yue Yao’s hold, as he had to do even for the more experienced Lan Xichen. However, Yue Yao immediately took the correct position.

"Are you sure you didn’t do it before?" asked Nie Mingjue.

"I just imitated the way you did it when you dispatched the beast," said Yue Yao, his smile nervous. "I have a good memory."

"You have more than good memory. This is incredible," said Nie Mingjue. "Did you see how to do a basic slash?"

"I think so," said Yue Yao as he tentatively swung the saber. He was clearly not used to the weight, his moves wavering.

"Don’t let it slow down!" instructed Nie Mingjue. "Do it again! Widen your stance! Yes, like this."

With his instructions Yue Yao quickly got the hang of it, his slashes almost perfect. Nie Mingjue showed him the basic drills and the boy kept practicing them even when the moon appeared in the sky. Nie Mingjue should have halted the lesson already but it felt nice to teach somebody so eager and with such a quick grasp of things.

"You have a lot of anger inside of you," said Nie Mingjue thoughtfully, after watching Yue Yao go through drills for a while.

"Excuse me?"

"I can feel anger in your movements. It’s not a bad thing. Makes you stronger." Baxia would likely like Yue Yao even more after this.

"I cannot say I’m feeling particularly angry at the moment," said Yue Yao, his face confused.

Perhaps he and Nie Mingjue had more in common than could be seen at first glance. Maybe Yue Yao also had to carry this anger with him everywhere. Nie Mingjue shook his head, "Let’s finish it. We need to be up early in the morning."

Yue Yao was quick to hand him back Baxia. "Thank you for the opportunity, Shixiong!"

Nie Mingjue nodded, feeling content. He really wished Nie Huaisang was this willing to learn. It would be nice to share this kind of bond with him.

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[1] Both are birds native to China.

Golden Eagle: A large, powerful bird of prey, known across many cultures as a symbol of majesty, supreme strength, solitary power, and unwavering focus. In imperial China, it was associated with martial prowess, authority, and high vantage points.

Red-Billed Leiothrix (the Pekin robin): A small, brightly colored songbird known for its melodious call, social nature, and striking appearance (olive-green body, bright yellow throat, and a distinctive red bill). It is often kept as a cage bird for its beauty and song. This bird is very active and an excellent singer but very secretive and difficult to see. In some cultures, the Leiothrix bird is considered a symbol of love and beauty.

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[2]As Meng Yao is not an official member of Nie sect, he doesn't actually have to call Nie Mingjue Shixiong (senior martial brother). Nie Mingjue's correction is demonstration of both inclusion and responsibility. He underlines that Yue Yao is his responsibility and should listen to him. Also, Nie Mingjue doesn't like unnecessarily formality.return to text ↩

Chapter 28: Secrets.

Shen Jiu slapped the list of names onto Nie Hongyi's table. "I need all the information you have on these people. Whatever records are left, the names of people who knew them… anything else you can think of. And I need to speak to your sect's chief physician."

"Good afternoon to you too," said Nie Hongyi, taking the list with a thoughtful hum. "What about these names in particular caught your attention?"

Shen Jiu pursed his lips. When he made a demand, he expected it to be fulfilled, no explanation required. It was possible he had been somewhat spoiled. He blamed Yue Qingyuan and Jiang Fengmian entirely.

"They died younger than the rest. The common age for qi deviation is between fifty and seventy," he said, gesturing at the list. "These thirty-six people all died decades before the average Nie. I will find out the reason why."

Nie Hongyi didn't seem impressed. "They likely lived through war or insurgency. There are always more qi deviations after violent conflict. Once the saber gets a good taste of human blood, it demands more."

It was always odd to hear Nie Hongyi speak about his saber as if it were alive. "What do you think I've been doing for the last month?" Shen Jiu said. "I've studied your sect's history extensively. Only twenty-nine of those people lived in the time of conflict. The most unusual case is Nie Huaiqi, who died forty years ago… at nineteen."

"Nineteen? That's unusual," said Nie Hongyi, becoming more serious. "And you're right. It was peaceful forty years ago. But our current chief physician won't help you with this one."

"Of course, I will ask the doctor only about the recent ones," said Shen Jiu, rolling his eyes. "Can I speak to him now, or should we arrange a meeting?"

"He is always busy, so might as well do it now. Let's make a tour out of it," said Nie Hongyi as he clapped his hands. The prospect of a tour seemed to amuse him. "I don't think you have been to this part of the sect before."

Predictably, the way to the Medical Pavilion led past the training pit. It was reasonable to have a doctor close by in case of a training incident. As they walked, Nie Hongyi paused, gesturing at the pit: "It was built on the remains of an old ore mine. My ancestors used it to forge their first sabers, whatever good it did to them."

"I have studied your sect's history, and I don't need you to recite it to me," said Shen Jiu as he glanced down into the pit. Two figures dressed in black instead of Nie green were easy to distinguish. Meng Yao and Wei Ying seemed to be doing well, swift as two leaves carried by a gust of wind. It was a distinct mark of Qing Jing sword style.

"I didn’t think your disciples would be well-suited for our style of cultivation, but perhaps I was mistaken," mused Nie Hongyi as he watched the drills beside him. "I could accept them as disciples."

"Over my dead body," said Shen Jiu as he turned away from the pit.

Nie Hongyi rushed after him. "Don’t be like that! Rogue cultivators don’t live that much longer than your regular Nie. It’s difficult without a sect’s support."

"We will manage," said Shen Jiu. No sect support was worth whatever was wrong with the Nie cultivation style.

They took a sharp turn into a quieter part of the Impure Realm. Nie Hongyi paused near a small courtyard, surrounded by a low wall made of the same grey stone as the fortress. A dark wooden building stood in the middle of it, its tiled roof bearing the signs of water damage.

"This is our Ancestral Hall[1]. One of the oldest buildings left standing in the Impure Realm," announced Nie Hongyi ringing with pride. Shen Jiu could never understand why people took pride in something their ancestors did. It wasn’t an achievement to be born in a certain family it was merely a happenstance.

He gave the building a second glance. "Why is it walled?"

"As you already know, my ancestors were butchers," said Nie Hongyi as if it were a proper explanation. "This was their original workshop. There are even hooks left on the ceiling and old bloodstains that soaked into the wood."

The idea of putting one’s Ancestral Hall into a place soaked with negative energy was blasphemous. No orthodox cultivator would approve of this. However, the Nie were allowed to keep to their ways of doing things and weren’t publicly shamed for it. It showed how much the strong and powerful could be forgiven for.

Shen Jiu tensed as soon as he caught a flicker of movement from the direction they had come from. When he glanced back, he saw a short figure clad in dark clothes. It was clearly a child, but not one of the Nie. Shen Jiu turned around to meet the intruder with a glare and crossed arms.

"Xue Yang!" he called. "Aren’t you supposed to be with your tutor?"

The boy approached them with no hurry. He even cheekily opened a caramel and put it in his mouth. "He said that I can have the afternoon free."

That was highly suspicious. However, if the brat had scared off his tutor, Shen Jiu didn’t want to know. Let Nie Hongyi deal with it. Shen Jiu was more concerned with a different matter.

"Where did you get the candy from?" he asked suspiciously. He knew for a fact that the Nie sect’s kitchens didn’t have caramels[2] in store. Shen Jiu privately enjoyed this type of sweets

so he knew that Xue Yang had to get them from somewhere else. Or, better said, from somebody else.

"None of your business," said Xue Yang, sticking out his tongue at him.

The answer came naturally to Shen Jiu. "I'll make it my business when I take it from you."

"I've eaten it all already, so you'll have to cut my stomach open!"

"If you want candy, I can buy you some," said Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu shook his head. "I can buy my own. This brat deserves none. Now, stop wasting our time and go bother someone else."

Xue Yang pouted theatrically. "But everybody is busy! I'm lonely! Can't I just go with you?"

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes. There was nothing particularly suspicious in the neediness. However, Xue Yang was usually somewhat more subtle about it. He had his pride. And that candy… Did Meng Yao bribe the brat to spy on him? Shen Jiu already told him that loudmouthed drunk wasn't his father. What else could Meng Yao possibly want to know?!

"Let's just take him with us," said Nie Hongyi. "It won't hurt to have a professional check how well his meridians have healed. It was a serious injury."

Shen Jiu watched the brat thoughtfully. If he was sent to spy, let him try. Then Shen Jiu would have a justified reason to give Meng Yao a stern talking-to. The boy had to learn not to rely on idiots when dealing with sensitive matters.

"Fine," said Shen Jiu. "Let's go. We have wasted enough time already."

The Medical Pavilion was a long, grey and unadorned hall, like most buildings in the Impure Realm. It was startlingly silent compared to the ever-bustling Qian Cao. The air was soaked with the smell of bitter herbs and old bandages.

A young disciple - no older than twenty - came out to greet them. "Sect Leader! Should I call for Master Gu?"

"Yes. And after that, Li Tai, could you give a check-up to this boy? He has recently recovered from a severe injury and I want to ensure his meridians are in a good state."

Li Tai bowed again and left to find his master.

"Do you know everybody's names?" asked Xue Yang idly as he walked in circles around Shen Jiu and Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu suppressed the desire to grab him and make him stand still.

Nie Hongyi grinned, pleased with himself, "Of course! What kind of leader would I be if I didn't know the names of people I am responsible for."

"What about the servants?" asked Shen Jiu.

"They are the most important ones! I interview each servant personally when I hire them. It’s a good practice to know the people who have direct access to you," said Nie Hongyi.

What an odd man. Shen Jiu had never met a noble with such attitude.

When Li Tai returned, he had a man with him, tall and narrow as a beanpole. His atrocious posture and dark bags under his eyes suggested a constant state of fatigue. The expression on his face could only be described as "he had just smelled something foul."

"What does our esteemed Sect Leader require from this humble one?" asked the man, his tone mocking.

Nie Hongyi sighed in exasperation. "Madam Shen needs to ask you some questions. Could we go somewhere private?"

The man, who introduced himself as Gu Nianyuan, took them to a small room overflowing with paperwork: some of it was even stacked on the floor. Noticing Shen Jiu’s glance, Gu Nianyuan said defensively, "I only have two disciples helping me and I cannot trust them with some of the paperwork."

"I did offer to find you a new disciple among the talented orphans," said Nie Hongyi.

"As if I want to teach some urchin how to read and count," said the physician. Shen Jiu really didn’t like this man. He needed to end this interrogation quickly before he slapped him or did something equally scandalous.

"I need you to tell me about the deaths of these people," Shen Jiu said, handing over the abridged list he'd compiled. It contained only the four most recent names, deaths Gu Nianyuan would have witnessed firsthand.

The medic took one long look at the list before saying, "Why look into their deaths? They all died of a qi deviation. An expected end in this sect."

"Their deviations occurred decades early," Nie Hongyi said, his voice level. "We seek the cause to prevent future losses."

Gu Nianyuan scoffed. "You know very well that the only way to stop qi deviations is to abandon those accursed sabers of yours! You are simply unwilling to let go."

The man spoke like an outsider. He didn’t have a saber on him but Shen Jiu thought nothing of it at first. It didn’t make much sense for a medic to carry his weapon at his work-place. For a non-Nie to hold such a vital position within the sect, while condemning its very foundation… it was either a sign of high competence or high lenience.

"Spare us the lecture. I have heard enough of your opinions," scoffed Nie Hongyi. "Just tell us everything you remember and answer Madam Shen’s questions."

The look Gu Nianyuan gave them was distinctly poisonous, but he did provide them with a short report. It was rather useless, a dry recitation of the usual symptoms of qi deviation that Shen Jiu knew too well from experience: intense headaches, difficulty breathing, dizziness,

mood swings and paranoia, which swiftly led to hallucinations, bleeding out of seven apertures and death.

"Are there many cases in which a person survived a qi deviation?" asked Shen Jiu. He had been saved from the brink of it many times before he finally succumbed to one, and Shen Jiu wasn't the only one. Were the rules of this world different, or were the Nie deviations irregular? That was what he needed to figure out.

"Qi transfers help in some cases, but usually the person succumbs to deviation later on. By the time the symptoms manifest, even abandoning the saber doesn't help," said Gu Nianyuan.

"You say usually but not always," said Shen Jiu.

"Such cases are few in number. It means nothing. All of them either perished on a night hunt or took the matter into their own hands."

"Suicide[3]?" asked Shen Jiu. "That's unusual."

The Nie sect members didn't seem like the types to condone such an act.

"Qi deviations can hit hard and fast in the most inopportune moments," said Gu Nianyuan, his words pointed. "Sometimes there are collateral victims. Often their loved ones. There is only one righteous way to deal with this sort of guilt, or that's what I've heard."

"That's enough for today," said Nie Hongyi, his voice hollow. Shen Jiu looked at his face and saw an impenetrable wall. "Gu Nianyuan, send me all the records you have on qi deviations as soon as possible."

"Wait," said Shen Jiu as Nie Hongyi stormed out of the office. He was ignored.

"You'd better leave this sect while you still can, Madam," said Gu Nianyuan quietly. "Getting entangled with a Nie will only bring you strife."

Shen Jiu wasted no time on the physician's ominous warning. He strode from the office, intent on catching up with Nie Hongyi, but discovered that the man had already vanished from the medical hall. Before he could pursue him further, Gu Nianyuan's disciple, Li Tai, got in his way.

"Little A-Yang is doing well, Madam, so you shouldn't worry. He is rather… spirited, though. Tried to bite me when I kept him away from the office," said the young man with a tense laugh. Shen Jiu didn't have time for that.

"I don't understand why I couldn't come with you," said Xue Yang with a pout. "Do you have some sort of secret? Are you pregnant?"

Shen Jiu hit the brat on top of the head on reflex. "Stop sprouting nonsense! We just don't need a noisy little brat around while we discuss important matters," said Shen Jiu as he left the medical hall, still hoping that he would manage to catch up with Nie Hongyi.

Pregnant! What an absurd thought! Yet, the thought lingered: Shen Jiu's body now had the ability to conceive. He hadn't thought about it before, but now even imagining it made him feel sick. Qiu Jianluo liked to whisper certain things that were better left forgotten.

He tried to focus on Nie Hongyi's notable absence. Shen Jiu wondered whether the Sect Leader used his saber to fly away. With no trail to follow, Shen Jiu returned to Nie Hongyi's office. He knocked on the door but nobody answered. Annoyed, Shen Jiu tried to open it only to find it locked.

"Madam Shen?" asked Nie Mingjue. The young man had a particularly severe frown on his face. "Do you have something urgent to discuss with the Sect Leader?"

"Yes," said Shen Jiu, letting his irritation be known. "He departed abruptly in the middle of an important discussion."

"It will have to wait. Father is not to be disturbed for the next few days," said Nie Mingjue.

"Did he give a reason?" asked Shen Jiu. The strangeness of it all left him uneasy.

"No. I just know that if he locks his office, it means that he is not to be disturbed," said Nie Mingjue. "If you need help with something, you can ask me. I can make arrangements in my father's stead."

Shen Jiu paused, thoughtful. His plans with the Medical Pavilion had gone awry in a most unexpected way, and he couldn't do much until he received the promised records. However, there was another place he needed to visit for his investigation.

"Could you arrange for me to meet your sect's blacksmith?" asked Shen Jiu.

Nie Mingjue was visibly startled. "I can, but what do you need him for? He forges sabers. He cannot make regular spiritual swords."

Did Nie Mingjue think he was stupid? Shen Jiu scoffed, "I need to speak to him as part of research that your father tasked me with."

The sentence was so vague, Shen Jiu expected it to be brushed away as a lie. However, Nie Mingjue seemed to take it at face value without any questions. "I can take you to see him tomorrow, after Huaisang's lessons." Straightforward to a fault. That reminded Shen Jiu of another straightforward man.

Shen Jiu inclined his head in agreement and turned to leave, but Nie Mingjue's voice stopped him. "How does Huaisang fare in his studies?"

"His root has strengthened, and his stamina has improved," Shen Jiu said. "His progress in painting, however, is exceptional. You should review his recent work. It shows remarkable progress." When it came to painting, Nie Huaisang was a perfect student, unlike in all other areas. His progress in the area was really remarkable and Shen Jiu took some pride in it as his teacher.

"You must be a skilled teacher, Madam Shen," said Nie Mingjue as stiffly as if he were making a formal report. "He does not complain of his lessons now. I had feared you were indulging him, but the results are undeniable."

To be praised in this stern but sincere manner made Shen Jiu squirm uncomfortably. He wanted to extract himself from this conversation as soon as possible.

"I must thank you for taking good care of my disciples while I am occupied," deflected Shen Jiu.

"It is no trouble. Yue Yao and Wei Ying are exemplary. Any sect would treasure such dedicated and talented disciples," said Nie Mingjue with unexpected warmth. Shen Jiu wasn't sure he liked that.

In the evening, Shen Jiu decided to deal with another matter. After supper, he sought out Meng Yao, but the boy was notably absent.

"Where is Yue Yao?" demanded Shen Jiu as he approached Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang.

Wei Ying pouted. "I don't know. He said that he needed to study. Didn't even want to see my fire talisman at work. I'd finally perfected it!"

"Just don't set any buildings on fire."

"Huaisang said that the summer pavilion is ugly, so it's not a big deal if we burn it by accident."

"Wei-xiong[4]," hissed Nie Huaisang.

"What? Don't worry, Shizun won't mind unless we get caught!"

Shen Jiu did not have the energy to entertain this nonsense, so he left Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang to their juvenile experiments. He made a note to himself that property damage seemed to be another way to get Nie Huaisang interested in cultivation.

After that, Shen Jiu barged into Meng Yao's room to find it empty. Irritated, he sat in wait, reading the first chapters of the newest work by Huai Qian, the author of "Green Plum, Black Despair", "Farewell at Magpie Bridge". Just like the previous work it started with a deceptively sweet scene between the young protagonist and his sweetheart.

Despite his suspicion, he still was taken aback when the girl's family forcibly separated the lovers and announced her engagement to a local landlord known for his cruelty. Shen Jiu shivered, imagining the girl's fate. The protagonist's promise to find a way to free her made his heart ache.

Meng Yao had yet to return to his room. It had gotten dark a while ago. Shen Jiu was on the brink of marching to Nie Mingjue and demanding that he send his disciples to search the Impure Realm. Then the door opened. Meng Yao flinched upon seeing Shen Jiu, who was waiting for him with his hands folded across his chest.

"What have you been doing out so late, A-Yao?" asked Shen Jiu, making an effort to contain his fury. That boy seemed to fancy himself an adult already, getting up to all sorts of funny business while unsupervised.

Meng Yao smiled at him, showing no sign of deception. "I was simply training, Mother. It's easy to lose track of time when it gets dark so quickly. My apologies for making you wait. Had I known you wished to speak with me, I would have come at once."

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes. "Training? Alone?"

If Meng Yao really was training, why didn't he invite Wei Ying? And why did he leave his brother to conduct dangerous experiments alone with Nie Huaisang of all people?

"I thought it was better for A-Ying to spend more time with Huaisang. He'd been down since we left the Jiangs, so it's nice to see him make a new friend," answered Meng Yao smoothly as if he had heard his thoughts.

Shen Jiu decided to let it go, moving on to the matter that had brought him here in the first place. "And what about Xue Yang?"

Meng Yao's expression turned politely confused. "What about him? He has a tutor, doesn't he? Or is there a problem?"

"Let Nie Hongyi worry about it," Shen Jiu waved it off. "There is another thing that bothers me… I have seen Xue Yang eating caramels today."

Shen Jiu watched for a reaction attentively, but there was none. "Perhaps his tutor attempted to bribe him for good behavior."

"So, it wasn't your gift?" asked Shen Jiu, making a show of nonchalance.

"The thought hadn't occurred to me," Meng Yao replied, then paused as if genuinely considering it. "Perhaps I should. It could serve as motivation." He offered another placating smile. "If it eases your mind, I can speak with him. Ensure he hasn't been accepting sweets from… suspicious strangers."

Somehow Shen Jiu didn't think of that. He'd assumed that Xue Yang learned his lesson about not doing favors for strange adults with unclear intentions. Meng Yao showed no signs of guilt, but he was such a good liar that it was impossible to tell.

"While you are here, Mother… Did you write to Sect Leader Jiang about the matter of our swords?" asked Meng Yao politely.

Shen Jiu looked aside. "I have been too busy to do it."

He was not. He just struggled with his pride hating to have to ask for such a big favor, even if he knew that this person would gladly help and not ask for anything in return. He loathed his own inability to provide his disciples with something as fundamental as a proper spiritual sword.

"Forgive my impertinence, but I have taken the initiative to draft a letter for you," said Meng Yao, his voice neutral. "I can…"

What was Meng Yao, his secretary? Or his minder?

"I will handle it," Shen Jiu snapped, cutting him off. "Do not trouble yourself."

Meng Yao looked disappointed but took it in stride. "Of course. Might I offer you some tea, Mother? It's been long since you and I had an opportunity to take tea together."

It had really been too long. Shen Jiu nodded, subduing the remains of his irritation. He knew that a pleasant conversation with Meng Yao would surely wash the rest of it away. He could never stay truly angry with his son.

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[1] An ancestral hall in ancient China was a sacred clan building for ancestor worship, rituals, and community gathering, serving as a memorial temple to honor lineage founders, and a symbol of family unity and cultural identity, closely tied to Confucian filial piety.

Ancestral halls and tombs were placed in locations with strong, positive qi, peaceful, elevated, facing favorable directions, often near mountains and water. The goal was to harness benevolent energy. return to text ↩

[2] Refined sugar sweets were a luxury in ancient China. Caramels or hard candies would not be something a martial sect just had in stock. return to text ↩

[3] In a warrior culture like the Nie ritual suicides as a response to profound shame are normalized. However, the orthodox cultivators would consider it a moral weakness and an act of succumbing to inner demons. That's the source of Shen Jiu's confusion. return to text ↩

[4] Literally "Brother Wei". A peer-to-peer term of address between friends. It implies closeness, camaraderie and a lack of formality.return to text ↩

Chapter 29: A crack in the facade.

Shen Jiu took a small sip from his cup. The tea the Nie kept in store was all too strong for his taste, but Meng Yao had the foresight to sweeten the pot with honey. Setting his cup down, he asked, “How do you like the Nie sect?”

“They have been most accommodating. I appreciate the hospitality,” said Meng Yao with a perfectly measured smile.

Meng Yao had perfected the art of eloquent, substance-less answers. Shen Jiu, however, wasn’t inclined to give up that easily. “Do you like it here as much as you liked it at Lotus Pier?” he asked directly.

Meng Yao laughed, an airy, fabricated sound that Shen Jiu despised. “But Mother, isn’t it like comparing a piece of roasted boar meat and a bowl of lotus root soup with pork ribs? Each has its merits, but they are too different to compare.“

“Still, if one comes to a restaurant one usually has to choose,” said Shen Jiu. His nails ached as he pressed them against the teacup in sheer irritation.

“The choice hinges on the person’s mood and other factors not connected to the dish’s quality.”

“Fine, be like that,” spat out Shen Jiu, looking aside. “But tell me at least if anyone has given you trouble.”

“Nothing I cannot deal with, Mother,” said Meng Yao, his smile fixed and his eyes empty. “But thank you for your concern.”

Shen Jiu gave him a long look. He didn’t know when this wall had appeared between them and he didn’t like it. “Do you have to speak in circles around me? We are not in the emperor’s court. And drop that awful smile. I don’t wish to see it.”

The corners of Meng Yao’s mouth twitched in an awkward wince, as if he didn’t know what to do with his face when not smiling. “But Mother, you were the one who taught me that even behind closed doors one has to maintain the facade.”

Shen Jiu had no memory of teaching Meng Yao that. It occurred to him that if it wasn’t his doing, it had to be a lesson from his predecessor. After all, the walls in brothels were not as thick as one might hope, and spying was commonplace.

It made sense to harbor such fears in the Hundred Flowers Tower. The Nie, however, were as subtle as a fist to the face, so Shen Jiu hardly expected them to stoop low enough to eavesdrop in this manner. Still, for Meng Yao’s peace of mind, he took out a privacy talisman and fixed it to the doorframe, making it glow in the scattered light of the room. “Better?” asked Shen Jiu blandly.

Meng Yao didn't seem pleased or relieved, in fact, his frown deepened, as if he had been caught in a lie. Whatever the problem was, he just didn't want to be honest with Shen Jiu.

"I… don't know what you want to hear from me, Mother," said Meng Yao finally. He waited until Shen Jiu was seated again. "Things were easier in Lotus Pier in some ways, but in other ways they were more complicated. Here at least there haven't been as many rumors yet."

"But there have been some?" asked Shen Jiu. He didn't care all that much, but it was wise to keep track at least. Just in case somebody decided to set a pack of dogs on him.

"The story of your duel with Madam Yu has reached Qinghe. Some people say that you dueled for Sect Leader Jiang's favor, but the version about you protecting a student is also popular."

A sip of tea tasted better now that he was speaking to his son, not to a wooden mask. "Are there any other rumors?"

"As expected, there were some whispers about your involvement with Sect Leader Nie, but…"

"But?"

"Young Master Nie put a stop to them immediately. He said that such rumors not only disrespect you and his father, but shame the whole Nie sect." There was an unmistakable shine in Meng Yao's eyes as he relayed the story.

"And it worked?"

"Some whispers might still be there, but nobody dares to say anything in my presence," said Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu hummed thoughtfully. "If you don't want that rumor revived, you'd better talk to Xue Yang. That little brat dared ask if I was… with child today," he said, wincing at the memory.

Shen Jiu didn't mind the female characteristics of his body, but there was something almost revolting about pregnancy that he couldn't quite stomach. The logical fact that his body had already given birth and the proof of it was sitting in front of him didn't help.

"He asked… what?" asked Meng Yao, his voice faint. "Where were you? Was it a public place? How many people heard you?"

"Calm down," scoffed Shen Jiu. "There was a medical disciple nearby… Li Tai, if I recall. Other than him, I don't think anyone heard."

Meng Yao took a deep breath. "This is manageable. I'll deal with it. And I'll talk to A-Yang."

"Aren't you going to ask whether Xue Yang was right?" asked Shen Jiu mockingly. "You seemed so sure about my involvement with that oaf, Nie Hongyi."

Meng Yao gave him a narrow-eyed look. “If you must know, I conducted my own research. Sect Leader Nie was nowhere near Yunmeng when I was conceived. Thus he cannot be my father.”

Shen Jiu snorted. What a ridiculous boy. “Did Nie Mingjue help you with that as well?” he asked mockingly.

Meng Yao blushed. “Just drink your tea, Mother.”

Shen Jiu smirked. The hero-worship at play was troubling, but it amused him to have something to tease Meng Yao about.

The following day, Shen Jiu finally allowed Nie Huaisang to practice actual dancing. He had purchased plain fans for the occasion weeks ago, during the market trip Nie Huaisang had blackmailed him into. Finding a stall that sold fans in the middle of winter had taken Shen Jiu the entire trip.

“You will now apply everything you have practiced. Watch me carefully and remember the sequence.” Shen Jiu assumed the opening stance. Nie Huaisang’s spacious quarters allowed for a wide range of movement, which served their purpose.

Nie Huaisang nodded energetically. His gaze was sharp and attentive, in stark contrast with the floppy boy Shen Jiu had met a month ago.

He took a deep, centering breath, and then the dance flowed from him in a smooth sequence. He knew the movements from hours of grueling practice, and so did Meng Shi’s body. There was no clash in technique. After all, Shen Jiu had learned to dance in a brothel.

It was entirely Liu Qingge’s fault. After he caused a spectacle that made Shen Jiu’s visits to Warm Red Pavilion a subject of gossip, Shen Jiu’s Shizun was, of course, less than impressed. In a desperate attempt to save himself some face, Shen Jiu told her that he went there to learn fan dancing from experts.

Obviously, his Shizun didn’t believe him for a second. However, either as a test or a punishment, she said that she awaited the day he would demonstrate her the results of his labor. Shen Jiu had no other choice but to actually learn to do it perfectly. Failure would embarrass him more than the initial scandal.

The final step of the dance brought him back to the present. His only audience stood there with his mouth open slightly. “Wow,” Nie Huaisang said eloquently. “That was amazing.”

“I don’t need praise. I need you to remember the sequence,” said Shen Jiu. “Do you?”

Nie Huaisang looked aside. “I’m not sure… It was rather quick…”

“Just do what you remember. I’ll adjust as needed,” said Shen Jiu.

He observed the boy go through the dance with a critical eye. The sequence was mostly correct, but its rhythm was a discordant, painful mess.

“Slow down. This dance is called ‘A green leaf dancing in the gentle breeze’ not ‘A green leaf caught in a hurricane’!”

“Not that slow. What are you, a court lady in ceremonial robes?? Make your steps wider!”

“The fan closes with a sigh, not a snap! You're not a street performer! And you finished too fast. If there was music, you’d just be standing there like a fool while it played on.”

“How can I think about the music if it’s not playing?” asked Nie Huaisang, wiping the sweat from his forehead.

“At this point music will only throw you off. You need to get used to the dance without it. Count in your head if you need to.”

He expected Nie Huaisang to whine and beg for a break, like he usually did, but the moment didn’t come. Even when the boy looked like he was about to faint, he stubbornly continued. He didn’t even sigh tragically like he often did!

In the end, Shen Jiu was the one to stop the practice. “At this point you clearly have no energy to carry on,” he said. “We will continue tomorrow. With music.”

Nie Huaisang brightened at that. “Thank you for the lesson, Madam Shen,” he chirped, not making a show of his exhaustion this time. He had at last learned it had no effect on Shen Jiu.

“You did… acceptable today,” said Shen Jiu curtly as he left the room. He didn’t care to watch the boy’s reaction to his words. He had more important things to do than that.

Nie Mingjue was waiting for him as agreed, stiff as a statue. Falling snow had begun to gather on his dark robes, and most of it shook loose when he bowed to Shen Jiu in greeting.

“Follow me, Madam Shen.” Nie Mingjue set off at a brisk, measured pace, one that Shen Jiu could match without effort. Just another thing that separated him from Liu Qingge. Shen Jiu’s shidi had this annoying habit of rushing headfirst, not checking whether his fellows were keeping up with him. Shen Jiu had, of course, reprimanded him for this discourtesy until he was blue in the face, to no avail whatsoever.

Come to think of it, Shen Jiu rarely found himself annoyed with Nie Mingjue. The only thing the young man shared with Shen Jiu’s most irritating shidi, besides his name[1], was his strength. In comparison, Nie Mingjue was quite pleasant company.

The Nie sect’s forge, the source of the awful smell he had noticed upon entering the Impure Realm, lay near the main gate. The building was half-sunken in the ground, dark smoke curling from a ventilation shaft in its roof. “Mind the steps,” said Nie Mingjue, leading the way inside.

There were indeed steps, but what truly deserved warning was the wave of dry heat that hit him upon entering. After the cold outside air, it was almost unbearable.

“Be quick! Don’t let the heat out!” hollered a scratchy voice.

The interior was dark, the high windows letting in little light, though cultivation rendered the poor visibility a minor inconvenience. By the firelight, Shen Jiu got a good look at the blacksmith. He was almost as tall and wide-shouldered as Nie Mingjue, his bare forearms covered with old burn scars. A deep scar, undoubtedly from the claw of some vicious beast, sliced across the man's cheek.

The man barely reacted to their presence, hammering upon the saber with deafening, rhythmic blows.

"Grandfather, I warned you that we were going to visit," said Nie Mingjue with exasperation.

"A moment," said the blacksmith. He struck the saber three more times before plunging it into a barrel of what Shen Jiu had assumed was water. However, as it sizzled and hissed, the stench of spoiled meat hit him, making him gag. Nie Mingjue silently opened the door to let in fresh air.

"I couldn't just leave it unfinished," explained the blacksmith as he wiped the dark liquid from the blade with a rag.

"What is in this barrel?" asked Shen Jiu as he snapped a fan open to save himself from the smell.

"Beast blood[2]," explained the blacksmith curtly.

"Does it prepare the blade for the beast core or is it used to subdue the core that's already there?"

"The first one." The blacksmith paused in wiping his hands. His gaze sharpened. "Who exactly are you to be asking such questions?"

"Shen Shi," said Shen Jiu curtly. "Conducting research on the Sect Leader's request."

The man looked surprised. "So you are A-Sang's teacher? From what he told me, I'd imagined some sort of old harpy not a dainty little thing like you."

Shen Jiu opened his mouth, a retort on his tongue. Nie Mingjue interjected before he could speak. "Madam Shen, this is Nie Zhenren, my maternal grandfather. He has overseen our forge for sixty years and can answer any questions you have."

"What's with the formalities?" complained Nie Zhenren. Shen Jiu studied him. Despite the scars, it was almost impossible to say that the man was in his eighties or older. That implied both a high cultivation level and an unusual lack of qi deviation.

Shen Jiu considered Nie Mingjue. He didn't know the depth of the sect heir's knowledge. It would have been considerate of Nie Hongyi's wishes to ask him to wait outside, but Shen Jiu did not wish to be considerate.

"Master Zhenren, were you the one who repaired the Sect Leader's saber?" asked Shen Jiu. He'd asked Nie Hongyi about it earlier, only to be brushed off with a simple, 'It's fine now.'

“So you are the strange lady who saw the crack in Taotie’s[3] flank?” asked Nie Zhenren, suddenly more interested in the conversation. “That explains it.”

“What crack?” asked Nie Mingjue, his voice tense.

“Don’t fret, A-Jue. The old girl’s right as rain. Nothing that a little heat and hammer couldn’t solve,” said Nie Zhenren.

“And what could have caused the crack in your experience?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Hard to say for certain. A powerful strike from another spiritual weapon, parried flat-on, could do it. Nie steel is sturdy. A crack like that could linger undetected for years.”

Was it possible Wen Ruohan wasn’t behind Nie Hongyi’s death after all? Shen Jiu didn’t remember that plot point clearly. He only recalled that the Nie Mingjue in the novel had believed it vehemently.

He glanced at the young man and was surprised to see a profoundly dejected look on his face.

“Don’t think about it too much, A-Jue,” said Nie Zhenren quietly, putting a hand on his grandson’s back. “The important thing is that Taotie is fine now.”

Nie Mingjue nodded woodenly. Shen Jiu had planned to ask about the history of broken sabers, but the moment was clearly wrong. He hadn’t expected Nie Mingjue to be so sensitive. It wasn’t as if his father had died.

“Do you maintain records for each saber you forge?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Unfortunately, it’s part of my job,” said Nie Zhenren. “What do you need them for?”

“I need information on sabers belonging to certain people,” said Shen. “I can give you a list.”

Nie Zhenren sighed. “Take the records. My eyes aren’t what they wer. You’d better look yourself.”

That was a giant breach of security, but Shen Jiu didn’t mind. He preferred to cross-reference himself in any case.

He asked a few more technical questions about the forging process. The answers were academically interesting but of little practical use. Nie Mingjue offered his own commentary: apparently, sect heirs were required to learn the art to ‘preserve the precious practice of saber making.’ Shen Jiu used all his self-control not to roll his eyes.

Shen Jiu planned to leave when something occurred to him. If Nie Zhenren had started sixty years ago, he might know things the physician did not.

“Master Zhenren, did you perchance know Nie Huaiqi? He died around sixty years ago at the age of nineteen,” Shen Jiu prodded.

Nie Zhenren looked thoughtful for a few moments. “Ah, I remember, Mingfeng’s wielder! Not that he wielded him for long. A beautiful saber, one of the last works by my old Master. A pity that the boy barely got to use it in action.”

Shen Jiu blinked. “Barely got to use it in action?” That went against everything that Nie Hongyi told him about the saber curse.

“Nasty business. A monster ambushed a junior hunting party, slaughtered them all, there was hardly anything left to bury. That boy was the only one who made it back, saw it all. Then the whispers started, that he’d run, left his martial brothers to die. He never picked up his saber again after that. Couldn’t bear to, I’d reckon.”

“That’s a disgrace,” said Nie Mingjue quietly. “Good martial brothers would support him and help him heal.”

“How much time passed between that night hunt and his qi deviation?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Don’t remember. The disciples usually started going on night hunts at thirteen, so perhaps seven years? Don’t take my word for it,” said Nie Zhenren.

Finally, Shen Jiu asked about broken sabers. As expected, it was a rare occurrence that always ended in qi deviation. He noted the names of all the victims to cross-reference with his lists later.

Four days passed without a glimpse of Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu spent most of his time examining Nie Zhenren’s ledgers, which were a mess. The entries were out of order, and the calligraphy was bad enough to make a scholar’s eyes bleed. He was deep in this task when the Sect Leader finally darkened his doorway, a tray of food in hand.

“A-Gao said you haven’t eaten yet,” said Nie Hongyi, instead of a greeting.

“So you’re going to pretend that nothing happened?” asked Shen Jiu, blocking the doorway with his body.

“What happened?” asked Nie Hongyi in an annoying way that reminded Shen Jiu of Nie Huaisang.

“You know what happened,” said Shen Jiu.

“Do I? Perhaps we can discuss it if you let me in?” asked Nie Hongyi teasingly. The urge to slap that smirk off his face was strong, but unlike Meng Yao seemed to believe, Shen Jiu did possess self-restraint.

Shen Jiu stepped away silently. Arguing with an open door was undignified anyway.

“I hope you like fish,” said Nie Hongyi, setting the tray down as if this were his own room.

“I like being given reason for people’s bizarre behavior,” said Shen Jiu, each word dripping with poison.

“Something important came up. Didn’t Mingjue do a good job assisting you in my stead?” asked Nie Hongyi, deliberately obtuse.

“Your son is more reliable than you, you should know,” said Shen Jiu snidely. At least Nie Mingjue didn’t let emotions interfere with business.

“I have no idea where he got it from,” said Nie Hongyi solemnly.

Having given up on getting answers right away, Shen Jiu sat down for a meal. Nie Hongyi seemed pleased by the development. Conniving jerk.

“So how is the investigation getting along?” asked Nie Hongyi casually.

Shen Jiu put down his chopsticks for a moment. “Speaking when you are eating is bad manners.”

“It’s no wonder you and Mingjue get along. You’d do well at Cloud Recesses,” laughed Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu, of course, ignored him.

After the meal, he gave a curt, professional report on his research, then stated his need to interview those who knew the qi deviation victims. They were discussing the details when Xue Yang burst in.

“I’ve had a nightmare,” cried Xue Yang, his voice a theatrical wail utterly devoid of actual fear. The brat couldn't even muster fake tears. Amateur. And it wasn’t late enough for Xue Yang to have been sleeping in any case.

“Have you?” asked Shen Jiu condescendingly.

Xue Yang nodded pathetically. “Can I stay in your room? The shadows are scary!”

This was getting ridiculous.

Another brat burst into his room immediately after that thought. This time it was Wei Ying. He looked at them with wild eyes.

“Sorry, Shizun! I might have told A-Yang a scary story,” said Wei Ying, laughing tensely. “He can sleep with me tonight!”

He grabbed Xue Yang by the shoulder and pushed the squirming brat out of the room. Shen Jiu used his cultivation to overhear Wei Ying hiss under his breath, “Why would you go along with it? Yao-ge will kill both of us.”

“Children,” said Nie Hongyi with a laugh. “Make life interesting, don’t they?”

“They make my life loud and annoying, that’s what they do,” said Shen Jiu.

“Huaisang used to do a similar thing when he was little. Funnily enough, he always had nightmares when I was entertaining some important guest. He was especially curious about Lan Qiren, for some reason.”

“Did he?” asked Shen Jiu thoughtfully.

Perhaps he had suspected Meng Yao prematurely. This whole operation had an overdramatic flair that wasn’t Meng Yao’s style at all.

“Almost every time. Don’t know what he expected to hear. It’s not like conversations with Lan Qiren are particularly exciting.”

The question about Nie Hongyi’s strange seclusion was still unanswered. The Sect Leader clearly considered the matter closed. Fine, Shen Jiu thought. He could get his answers by other means.

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[1] Before receiving his generational "Qing" name in this fic, Liu Qingge's courtesy name was Liu Míngjué (刘溟决) - "溟" (Míng) meaning the profound depth (shared with his sister, Liu Mingyan), and "决" (Jué) meaning resolute decisiveness. This sounds the same as Nie Míngjué (聂明玦) - "明" (Míng) meaning bright clarity and "玦" (Jué) a slit-ring jade ornament. In ancient Chinese military tradition, a jue was not merely symbolic. It served as a general's token of authority, giving the power to command and make irreversible decisions in the field. return to text ↩

[2] In Chinese folklore, blood-quenching was believed to transfer the creature's spirit into the weapon. I used this as a fun fantasy element, so imagine my surprise when I found that blood-quenching was an actual thing blacksmith’s in different cultures did. return to text ↩

[3] The name of Nie Hongyi’s saber. The Taotie (饕餮) is an ancient Chinese mythological creature. Representing insatiable gluttony, greed, and one of the "Four Perils," its design features a stylized, symmetrical zoomorphic mask with prominent eyes, horns, and no lower jaw. It serves as a warning against greed and is often considered a "gluttonous" monster that, in legends, devoured its own body. return to text ↩

On Shen Jiu’s Gender

I’ve been asked several times about Shen Jiu’s gender identity, as readers are justifiably uncertain about which pronouns to use for him. I won’t go into too much detail now, because Shen Jiu’s relationship with gender will become a minor plot point later. However, there are a few things I can clarify for those who are confused.

1) Both he/him and she/her are acceptable. Shen Jiu doesn’t have a strong preference. He refers to himself with he/him pronouns internally because his sense of self hasn’t changed from his past identity. However, he doesn’t particularly mind being perceived as a woman. To him, his body is merely an instrument: he is Shen Jiu regardless of appearance, and the way people treat him because of his gender is either an annoyance or a convenience.

2) While I will explore Shen Jiu’s relationship with gender further in the story, I don’t plan to assign him a definitive, “word of God” gender identity.

First, he is a person in ancient China without the necessary vocabulary or capacity for deep self-reflection.

Second, his understanding of gender is deeply entangled with his trauma and his distorted views on men and women. Fully unpacking it would probably require an additional fic.

Finally, I believe it's nice to leave room for readers to form their own interpretations. So, headcanon away!

Chapter 30: Red bean paste.

When Meng Yao finished wrapping the dumplings and put them to steam, he was hit by a sluggish onslaught of melancholy. Last time he made sweet dumplings[1], Yanli was there by his side, her face lit by a gentle smile. Leaving Lotus Pier was for the best. Meng Yao agreed with his mother's decision completely. But… he really missed his friend.

If she were here, he could tell her how Nie Mingjue taught him how to fight with a saber when he had free time, and how he made Meng Yao's stomach flutter like in that silly book they had once giggled over together. He would tell Yanli how the Nie disciples treated him like an errand boy, making him feel like a servant again.

He could confide how his mother still didn't entrust him with important matters, treating him as a child, as if he hadn't been advising her for years. Meng Yao could whisper only for Yanli to hear that he never wanted to be a rogue cultivator forgotten in mediocrity, that the uncertainty of their standing was maddening, that he wished they had a place they could actually call home.

Deep in thought, Meng Yao almost steamed the dumplings for too long. He quickly transferred them to a deep, lidded bowl he had borrowed from the kitchens, and thanked the kitchen workers once again. He had taken care to endear himself to the servants of the Impure Realm, so they were eager to help.

He found Xue Yang, as expected, in his room, busy with homework. His newest tutor assigned A-Yang calligraphy exercises, and Meng Yao had persuaded the boy to do them regularly. It wasn't difficult, Xue Yang really didn't like the idea of everybody around him having a way to communicate secretly.

Meng Yao was pleased to see his little brother diligently writing, though his posture was atrocious and the table a chaos of ink and paper. Meng Yao made a note of thanking the servant responsible for cleaning Xue Yang's room. Perhaps he could even bribe her discreetly, so if she found something stolen in Xue Yang's room, she would come to him first.

"Is it for me?" asked Xue Yang immediately, making grabby hands at the bowl.

"Perhaps you should clear a space first. I don't want you to stain your homework."

"I can eat on the floor," said Xue Yang. In his impatience, he stood and snatched the bowl from Meng Yao's hands.

Usually, Meng Yao would try to gently adjust Xue Yang's behavior. However, this was a bribe, so he let it go.

"I left my knife under the pillow this morning," said Xue Yang with his mouth full. "And I went to lessons on time and didn't call the big jerk any names, even when he said that I was running wrong."

Xue Yang stopped chewing to look expectantly at Meng Yao. It took a moment to understand: despite his abrasiveness, Xue Yang was still a child craving affection. Meng Yao sat on the floor beside him and placed a hand on his head, petting gently.

Xue Yang moved his basket of dumplings away from Meng Yao as if afraid that his food would be stolen, but leaned into the touch and sighed in contentment. Meng Yao remembered when even the smallest touch would put A-Yang on guard and was happy to see his brother trust him more. To keep this precious trust, he would have to be really gentle.

“I’ve heard you have been getting caramels from somebody,” Meng Yao started. “If you want something sweet, I could always make something for you like today. You shouldn’t need to… perform tasks for treats.”

Xue Yang shrugged, and ate another dumpling. There was now bean paste in the corner of his mouth. Mother would be furious if she saw A-Yang’s table manners, but Meng Yao had other priorities at the moment. “I don’t mind. I just have to spy on people, it’s not difficult.”

Meng Yao widened his eyes purposefully. “Really? Do they need more spies? Caramels are really expensive. I’d like to earn some too, if it’s that simple.“

“He told me not to tell anybody,” said Xue Yang.

“I’d give you half of my caramels. It’s only fair if you get me this job,” offered Meng Yao.

“It was Nie Huaisang,” said Xue Yang, and began to lick his fingers clean. Meng Yao really had to work at his table manners in the future. If Mother saw this, she would have a conniption.

“Oh, really? I will ask him then,” said Meng Yao.

Xue Yang hummed, not interested in the conversation anymore. Unfortunately for him, Meng Yao wasn’t done.

“Mother told me about some things you said.” Meng Yao placed his hands on his knees, adopting a serious tone. “Please, don’t say anything about her having relations with Sect Leader Nie even as a joke.”

“Is it because I asked her if she was pregnant?” asked Xue Yang. “I just asked a question! She was the one who got all weird. And she already hit me for it, so we are even.”

Meng Yao counted silently to ten to keep his voice kind and gentle. “When you say things like that about women you put them in danger. They are judged by their chastity. Any scandalous rumor can hurt our standing and make us leave.”

“This is stupid,” grumbled Xue Yang.

“I know it’s stupid and unfair,” said Meng Yao soothingly. “But we must be careful to keep our nice life here. If we had to go back on the road, I wouldn’t be able to make you any more sweet dumplings, and we would have to sleep in the cold again. You don’t want that, right, A-Yang?”

“Fine. I won’t say anything about her sleeping around,” said Xue Yang, his face scrunched.

“She is not ‘sleeping around’,” said Meng Yao, feeling the strain at the corners of his smile. A-Yang was a child. He didn’t know any better. Getting offended would be irrational.

Xue Yang gave him an unimpressed look. Meng Yao wouldn’t allow a seven-year-old’s opinions to impair his judgment.

“I need to speak to Nie Huaisang now. Be good, A-Yang.”

Xue Yang made a tut-tut sound that reminded Meng Yao of his mother. Together with the disdainful frown it was uncanny.

When Meng Yao approached Nie Huaisang’s room, it occurred to him that this would be their first conversation alone. He had grown so accustomed to Wei Ying’s constant, chattering presence that he paused at the door, considering his approach. Nie Huaisang was generally amiable, but he possessed a certain stubborn streak that had to be accounted for.

“Come in,” called Nie Huaisang, immediately after Meng Yao knocked. Inside, the young master lounged on his bed with an illustrated scroll spread open beside him.

“Ah, Yue Yao!” said Nie Huaisang, his face brightening. “You are just the person I need!”

“Am I?” asked Meng Yao, amused by Nie Huaisang’s eagerness.

"Of course you are! Now come here," chirped the kid, beckoning Meng Yao closer. "You're the only one who hasn't seen it yet! What do you think?"

He was pointing toward a new painting on his wall: the blue-tailed bird sitting in a cage, an exact copy of the one he still kept in his room, even though it had mostly recovered. Meng Yao tilted his head, giving it an appraising look.

“The depiction honors the beauty of its inspiration,” Meng Yao said. “The composition is elegant, and the use of color is vivid yet harmonious. The brushwork on the feathers is particularly fine. Excellent work.”

Nie Huaisang bloomed under the praise, and Meng Yao felt pleased. He did enjoy making people happy.

“Thank you! I have to give due credit to Master Shen. In a month she taught me more than I’ve learned in a lifetime.”

“I’m happy that you two found a way to sort out your differences. It seems that you get along with all my family. Even Xue Yang appears quite taken with you,” said Meng Yao innocently.

“Does he? I didn’t notice. He is a… strange child,” said Nie Huaisang nervously.

Meng Yao pressed at the weakness. “But of course! If he didn’t like you, he wouldn’t play this spying game with you, would he?”

Nie Huaisang blinked, his confusion so natural Meng Yao almost believed him. “Spying game?”

“If you wish such ‘games’ to remain discreet,” Meng Yao advised, his smile not faltering, “I’d suggest a less traceable currency than caramels. They are rare and expensive, not something a child could get from anywhere.”

“It was just a gift. A-Yang must have misunderstood,” said Nie Huaisang stubbornly.

“It’s kind of you to indulge him. Getting used to a new place is difficult for a child. However, it’s prudent to choose games with… fewer potential consequences. None of us wants a misunderstanding to occur, I’m sure.”

“Such a caring older brother! Just like my Da-ge, you worry too much. Surely no one would take a child’s game seriously,” said Nie Huaisang airily. He made a stronger opponent than Meng Yao had expected.

“Even a child’s word can be interpreted maliciously. One ill-considered question, posed at an inopportune moment, in a medical hall, for instance… It’s enough for a dangerous rumor to appear.”

“In other sects perhaps, but not in the Impure Realm,” Nie Huaisang stated with surprising firmness. “Our head physician is strict and won’t allow any rumors. He says that ‘idle tongues cause untreated illnesses’.”

“How disciplined,” said Meng Yao, contemplating whether this rule could be trusted. “Still it doesn’t diminish the risk. I’m afraid I’ll have to insist that these games stop. I’m sure your brother will agree with me.”

Of course, Meng Yao wasn’t going to involve Nie Mingjue, but Nie Huaisang couldn’t know that.

Suddenly, Nie Huaisang’s manner shifted, a flash of metal under the silk. “I have a new game in mind. A private play for our parents to enjoy.”

“A play?” By private Nie Huaisang surely meant that there would be no witnesses other than their parents.

“Oh yes, have you read stories where a frightened child interrupts his mother’s secret meeting, clinging to her skirts, and overhears something he shouldn’t?”

So Nie Huaisang also wanted to know what their parents were hiding. But wouldn’t he be in the know? If Meng Yao’s mother was telling the truth, she was investigating a secret flaw in Nie cultivation style, something that allowed Sect Leader’s saber to be cursed or corrupted… But wouldn’t Nie Huaisang know about it?

“It’s a nice device for a story, but, surely, in real life the mother would be more careful with her secrets,” said Meng Yao.

If his mother lied to him, would joining forces with Nie Huaisang help him find the truth?

Nie Huaisang waved his hand dismissively. “If the child bursts in quickly, he could still see something compromising. Perhaps… He could catch his mother in an act of passion?”

Meng Yao felt his cheeks burn. “Impossible!”

He’d overestimated Nie Huaisang. The boy had his head in the secret romance books. Getting involved with his schemes would be courting danger.

Nie Huaisang blinked at him, “Is it truly impossible? Undesirable, yes, but not impossible. I presume you share my feelings on this development… Becoming step-siblings can get in the way of romance, and wouldn’t that be tragic?”

Meng Yao flinched. It appeared that Nie Huaisang could be dangerously smart but only in the areas that interested him. Meng Yao would have to take it into account.

“I don’t quite understand your point,” said Meng Yao.

Nie Huaisang blinked, “Don’t worry, I approve. You’re a far better option than whatever stuffy Lan disciple my brother writes to. I merely thought you might want to help ensure our parents don’t… complicate things.“

What stuffy Lan? If Meng Yao now asked he would all but admit it, but… He could find out on his own.

“There is nothing happening,” insisted Meng Yao. Surely, his mother would… No, she wouldn’t tell him. But that would explain… No, it was ridiculous!

“How can you be so sure?” asked Nie Huaisang. “They spend time together privately and publicly, and it appears that my father is involving Master Shen in the sect’s business. He could be preparing her for her new position.”

That was logical, but Meng Yao couldn’t accept it.

“I know my mother, and she is simply not interested in getting remarried. I would appreciate it if you didn’t involve A-Yang in your games. It can only cause unnecessary drama,” said Meng Yao.

Despite their conversation, Meng Yao didn’t trust Nie Huaisang to halt his plans. He told Xue Yang not to do anything Nie Huaisang asked, but that also didn’t guarantee anything. That’s why Meng Yao kept a close look on his youngest brother for the next few days.

It went smoothly until one evening Nie Mingjue invited him to train together. Refusing wasn’t an option.

“So I just have to make sure that A-Yang doesn’t leave his room?” asked Wei Ying, tilting his head.

“If he wants to go out, you can let him, but you’ll have to accompany him,” corrected Meng Yao, tying his hair in a way that he knew made him look more grown up. “Just make sure that he doesn’t bother Mother.”

“Are they fighting again?” asked Wei Ying, his voice confused. Ah, what a dull world A-Ying lived in, to be in the center of things and know nothing of what was going on. Meng Yao couldn’t even imagine what it was like.

“Not really. I’ll explain later, I have to go now,” said Meng Yao as he rushed out. He preferred to come at least fifteen minutes in advance, but this time it would have to be just five.

The training went well, though Meng Yao still had yet to get to step thirteen of his two hundred and thirteen step plan of becoming Nie Mingjue’s friend: spend time together outside of training and/or night-hunts. Meng Yao was sure he would get there in a month or two.

He returned still thrumming with the pleasant afterglow of training. There was something about training with saber that made Meng Yao feel loose when it was over. Perhaps it was just the result of spending time with Nie Mingjue.

What he saw in his room quickly put a damper on his mood. Wei Ying and Xue Yang waited for him together in heavy silence, only glancing at him warily when he entered.

“Did something happen?” asked Meng Yao, already knowing the answer.

“I’m sorry, Yao-ge,” said Wei Ying, eyes downcast. “Nie Huaisang came to show me a book he found, and I didn’t notice A-Yang slip out of his room.”

That little… Meng Yao took a deep breath. He underestimated Nie Huaisang’s willingness to get personally involved in this scheme. He wouldn’t make the same mistake twice.

“What did he do?” asked Meng Yao.

“Did us all a favor, that’s what I did,” said Xue Yang sullenly. “You want a screaming baby around? I don’t.”

“I don’t know where he got the idea,” said Wei Ying, exasperated. “He burst into Shizun’s rooms when she was having dinner with Sect Leader Nie. Started screaming that he had a nightmare or something… I dragged him out as soon as I noticed, but it was too late.”

“I see,” said Meng Yao.

“Are you mad?” asked Wei Ying, glancing at him quickly. Meng Yao liked that his opinion was so important to Wei Ying. It made his chaotic brother feel more… controllable.

“It’s my own fault,” admitted Meng Yao. “I should have warned you about Nie Huaisang’s involvement.”

“Wait, did he distract me on purpose?” asked Wei Ying. Meng Yao could say a lot about his brother’s obtuseness, but at least he wasn’t stupid.

“Most definitely. He asked me to join this scheme before, but I had forbidden it. It seems that he didn’t listen. For some reason, he believes that his father and my mother have… some sort

of romance going on. He is determined to put a stop to it."

Meng Yao winced. He didn't like thinking about his mother in this context. It reminded him of the time in his life he would rather forget.

"This is stupid," said Wei Ying.

"It's not stupid!" said Xue Yang defensively. "They go to places together, and they talk alone. Only couples do that. Sang-ge agrees with me!"

Sang-ge? That was a new development. Meng Yao didn't have the time to be troubled by it.

"Shizun wouldn't just have an affair. She's afraid of men," said Wei Ying. "If Sect Leader Nie had some designs for her, she would have stabbed him already."

Meng Yao blinked. Of course, his mother was wary of men, after everything she had been through it was understandable, but to say that she was afraid… It was unthinkable. Mother was unshakable, unflappable, she moved through life fearlessly unlike Meng Yao who had second thoughts about his every move. Could she really be afraid of something?

But wasn't she weak and frail once, hiding bruises and faking smiles? Meng Yao had to stretch his memory to remember Mother before she suddenly grew teeth. He thought that she became strong and fearless. That he could do the same.

"When why does she spend so much time with the old guy?" asked Xue Yang, pouting.

Wei Ying groaned. "The Nie Sect uses resentment in their cultivation. It's strong enough to seep in the training grounds," said Wei Ying as if he was explaining something basic. "There was something wrong with Sect Leader's saber, Shizun saw it, so now they want her to help with their cultivation. She is the only person who studied resentment after all."

Meng Yao felt stupid. He also figured out that there had been an issue with the saber, though he assumed it was some sort of a curse. When his mother told him about a weakness in Nie cultivation style, he thought it was some sort of a flaw that allowed a curse to stick. That actually made him doubt his Mother's words, because why would she be the one asked to help, when there were many other people with more experience. The fact that resentment could be involved didn't even occur to him.

He felt stupid. He wanted to ask Wei Ying more questions, but when it occurred to him they shouldn't have been digging in this matter at all. One of the five great sects used resentment in their cultivation, this was a secret too dangerous to keep.

"Please, speak of this to no one else," Meng Yao instructed. "It's for our own safety."

Mother would be so mad if it spread around… Meng Yao wanted her to accept his help, he didn't actually want to get in her way.

"And what about Nie Huaisang?" asked Wei Ying.

Meng Yao thought about it for a moment. It was Nie Huaisang's sect's secret, so it wasn't as dangerous to tell him, or to point him in the right direction at least. That could be enough to make the boy abandon the romantic angle and lead his investigation in the other direction. Meng Yao would have to consider it carefully. Perhaps they could exchange information…

"I'll speak to him myself," said Meng Yao. "Don't tell him anything yet. And A-Yang, stop following his orders, you are not his pet are you?"

That was mean but Meng Yao was just a tad annoyed. Xue Yang snarled at him. He really was like an animal sometimes. Getting harsh wouldn't teach him anything but fear and humiliation.

Meng Yao sighed, lowering himself to his knees so he could speak face to face to the boy. "We are family now, A-Yang. That means that we work together and help each other. Outsiders can be friends, but family always comes first."

Xue Yang drilled him with his eyes then looked away. "You'll have to make me more sweet food then."

"Everything for my little brother," said Meng Yao sweetly. The tip of Xue Yang's ear became red.

"Do I get food too, Yao-ge?" Wei Ying asked, draping himself over Meng Yao's shoulders. "I want soup. It's been forever since you made me soup."

Xue Yang made a face, "You can ask for anything, and you choose soup?"

"Wait, till you try lotus root and pork rib soup. Yunmeng soups are the best!" said Wei Ying as he dragged Xue Yang closer to them, making the boy fall half across Meng Yao's lap and face-first into Wei Ying's chest.

"What are you doing!?" squeaked Xue Yang indignantly.

"Need cuddles from my baby brother," said Wei Ying, jostling the three of them around playfully. "I've had a nightmare so now I'm sad and lonely!"

That startled a laugh out of Meng Yao. He didn't extract himself from the pile even as the hug turned into a tussle. It was nice to see them having freedom to just be childish. Meng Yao had to protect them so they could keep this freedom.

When Nie Mingjue approached him, Meng Yao had just finished setting the dislocated shoulder of a villager injured in the beast's attack. Despite the rigorous fight that Meng Yao had witnessed from the sidelines, there was no trace of grime on Nie Mingjue's clothes. Meng Yao wished he could someday reach this level of skill.

"Good job with the clean-up," said Nie Mingjue.

Meng Yao felt warmth in his chest, which made his smile more sincere than it usually was. "Thank you."

It was irritating that Meng Yao still didn't have a proper spiritual weapon, so he couldn't show his skill in battle and finally gain the respect he deserved. After being one of the top disciples in Lotus Pier, it was demeaning to be treated as some sort of helpless bystander.

At least Nie Mingjue saw his worth.

"Do you need anything at the market?" asked Nie Mingjue. Meng Yao blinked at the sudden question.

"Possibly. Do you need me to procure something for you?" He wasn't presumptuous enough to read this as invitation, but he could hope it to be.

"No. I'll make a detour to buy a present for Huaisang. Your mother said that he is making progress, so I want to encourage him with a gift. Your advice will be welcome. If you don't mind going with me," said Nie Mingjue, scratching the back of his head awkwardly. This was simply adorable.

"I'd be happy to accompany you! I like to bring souvenirs for my brothers if I have an opportunity," said Meng Yao, widening his smile.

He thought it was useful to underline the fact that he was a caring older brother just like Nie Mingjue himself. It helped that he really liked to spoil his brothers. Also, he needed something to bribe Xue Yang with.

"Good," said Nie Mingjue. "I'll collect you when we are finished here."

It didn't immediately occur to Meng Yao that they would have to share Baxia. Heat rushed to his cheeks, and he was relieved when Nie Mingjue walked away. This particular reaction wasn't something Meng Yao had learned to control yet. He was sure there was a way to control blood flow with cultivation, but it wasn't something he felt comfortable experimenting with.

Meng Yao attended to the rest of the injured with heightened energy, thinking of the upcoming… outing. A one-on-one personal time together would not only get him to the fourteenth step of his plan but allow him to get steps fifteen to twenty-one out of the way in a single day. That was efficiency at its finest.

Meng Yao, of course, realized that he might have gotten just a tad overexcited, so he considered all the potential pitfalls and thought of countermeasures. That made the rest of the clean-up pass in a flash.

Before Meng Yao knew it, he was standing in front of Nie Mingjue, who had already mounted his saber and was waiting for Meng Yao to join him. For a moment, Meng Yao drew a blank. It was a ridiculous reaction, considering that he regularly had to catch rides with other disciples. He knew what to do, but with Nie Mingjue he suddenly felt like he didn't know where to look and where to put his hands, and did he look calm? He didn't feel calm! What was even happening to his face?

Meng Yao stepped onto the saber before his hesitance could be noticed. Nie Mingjue had a very wide back. He tried not to wrinkle robes that cost more than all of Meng Yao's clothes combined, but then Nie Mingjue ordered him to hold on tighter so Meng Yao had to put his hand on Nie Mingjue's waist.

It was a long trip. Meng Yao almost missed it when they landed.

The town they landed in had an unusually bustling market. Meng Yao didn't recognise it, but from their flight path he could tell it was near the border of Nie lands, a fact confirmed by the long line of merchant carts on the main road.

"So, what do you think Huaisang would like?" asked Nie Mingjue, straight to the point as always.

Usually Meng Yao appreciated it. It was nice to know for sure what the other person was thinking. However, he couldn't allow this to cut their excursion short. "Let's browse for a bit and see what they have in store." Nie Mingjue nodded and they began moving from stall to stall.

A problem with Meng Yao's plan soon became apparent. He had intended to use the wares as conversation prompts, asking Nie Mingjue about himself in an inconspicuous way. However, the answers were… lacking.

Nie Mingjue had no favorite food, no favorite childhood toy, no favorite book, no actual preference for clothes and accessories other than their suitability for his position. His answers were curt. From anyone else, Meng Yao would have taken this as a polite refusal, but Nie Mingjue would simply have said so if he didn't want to talk.

The only topic that managed to prompt actual conversation was their little brothers, so Meng Yao resigned himself to exchanging anecdotes about shenanigans their brothers had gotten up to at one point or another. Some of his stories even got a laugh out of Nie Mingjue, which wasn't something Meng Yao had the honor of hearing before. He almost stumbled over his own feet the first time he heard it.

By the end of their trip, they had bought a beautiful new fan for Nie Huaisang and some sweets for Meng Yao's brothers and his mother, who wasn't as good at pretending she didn't like sweet things as she thought she was. Meng Yao was lamenting that their excursion had to end when he noticed a familiar face in the distance.

Han Tao, the hapless bandit his mother had not only spared but given some money to, was now selling pastries. Meng Yao was happy to see he hadn't returned to banditry.

"Have you forgotten something?" asked Nie Mingjue, alarmed by his distraction.

"Ah, no, just saw a familiar face," said Meng Yao.

He couldn't wait to tell his mother about it. Though he would have to omit Nie Mingjue's presence during the trip. He still wasn't sure about her stance on their friendship. At first she

was so vehemently against it that it was almost scary, but the last time they talked she seemed to be amused by it.

“We have time if you wish to speak to your acquaintance,” Nie Mingjue offered.

Meng Yao shook his head. “I don’t want to embarrass him. It’s a funny story. You see, that man was among the bandits who attacked our cart. He made such a pitiful spectacle after I tied him up that even my mother took pity…“

He thought this an entertaining anecdote. However, Nie Mingjue didn’t seem to share his view, as he immediately tensed. “A criminal? Point him out to me. We’ll take him to receive justice.”

“He said he only joined the bandit gang to buy medicine for his ill younger brother,” added Meng Yao quickly.

Nie Mingjue scoffed, “Those scoundrels will say anything to escape justice.”

“But if he lied why would he be here now selling pastries? It’s clear that he had a change of heart.” The moment he said that Meng Yao realised his mistake. By specifying the stall, he had painted a target. Nie Mingjue began striding forward.

Meng Yao grabbed his arm with both hands, channeling qi to halt his progress. Nie Mingjue looked down at him, annoyed. “It’s good that you try to see the good in people, but don’t let your compassion be used against you. I’m sure that this food stall is just a front for some nefarious scheme.”

Was this what his mother feared? For a moment Meng Yao considered agreeing. Was that man’s life really worth good relationship with Nie Mingjue? But then a terrifying thought crossed his mind. If Nie Mingjue couldn’t be persuaded to spare some unskilled bandit, what would he think if he found out about Meng Yao’s past, about his mother’s crimes?

“I… I can’t be sure it’s really him,” said Meng Yao quickly. “Should we accuse a man based solely on my memory? I don’t even know his name.”

Nie Mingjue gave him an unimpressed look. “I haven’t known you for that long, but your memory is unrivalled. Don’t taint yourself with lies for some scoundrel, Yue Yao.”

Taint? If lies were dirty, there was no washing the stain off for Meng Yao. Even his name was a lie.

“Young Master!” A boy’s voice chirped. A child Xue Yang’s age came running up. “Da-ge told me to give you these! He said your mom gave him money for my medicine. Thank you!” He thrust two baos into Meng Yao’s hands.

Meng Yao accepted the pastries. Nie Mingjue’s expression had shifted to something complex and unreadable, so Meng Yao decided to use the opportunity to play on his heartstrings. “Did the medicine help?” he asked.

“Yes! I can play outside now and help Da-ge make pastries! I made the filling for the baos myself.”

“That’s good,” said Meng Yao, smiling at the child. The boy grinned, revealing an adorable gap where a front tooth had recently been. Meng Yao wondered whether A-Yang would lose any teeth soon.

“Let’s go, Yue Yao,” said Nie Mingjue, his voice low. He turned and walked away without another glance. Meng Yao had to hurry after him to avoid being stranded. When they were in a secluded spot, Nie Mingjue told him to step onto Baxia.

Meng Yao expected that they would go home after this, but Nie Mingjue guided Baxia down to a secluded cliff overlooking a vast pine forest. By its direction, Meng Yao guessed it to be near the sect yet removed from any main path or road.

“Sorry, I should have asked you before taking you here,” said Nie Mingjue his gaze fixed on the white tips of the pine trees below. “This is where I come to… pause. And think.”

Meng Yao felt a thrill at the idea of Nie Mingjue sharing such a place with him. Though he suspected that it was a matter of circumstances rather than trust.

“You did the right thing,” said Meng Yao softly.

“I allowed sentiment to sway my reasoning. Now if this man returns to crime and hurts someone, I would be the one to blame,” said Nie Mingjue.

That was a very difficult way of looking at things.

“You cannot hold yourself responsible for every person’s choices,” he said firmly.

Nie Mingjue turned to look at him, his face grim. “If I let a known criminal go, then I’m responsible for every crime he goes on to commit.”

“I asked you to spare him, wouldn’t it make me responsible?” asked Meng Yao, daring to meet Nie Mingjue eyes as he said it.

“You are my shidi. I’m the one who has the final call, so I’m responsible,” said Nie Mingjue. Stubborn like an ox, but Meng Yao had experience arguing with stubborn people.

“Then look at it from the angle: that young man’s patents are dead, so he is his three younger siblings’ only caretaker. If we take him to receive justice, wouldn’t we be responsible for casting those children out the the streets?” asked Meng Yao.

“He could turn them toward the life of crime with his bad influence,” said Nie Mingjue sharply.

“Orphanhood would do the same. Isn’t it better to give them a chance?”

Nie Mingjue stared at him, a searching look in his eyes. The silence stretched, filled only by the wind. Finally, he murmured, “Perhaps you are right.” He let out a long breath. “Let’s stay

awhile. I need to… think."

He turned and sat on the cliff's edge, his legs dangling down, staring at the horizon where the first blush of sunset made it's timid entrance. Tentatively, Meng Yao joined him, settling a respectful distance away, stealing glances at Nie Mingjue's pensive profile. The sun began to bleed over the crisp white landscape, painting everything in breathtaking shades of rose and amber.

"I hope Huaisang hasn't gotten into any trouble while I'm away," said Nie Mingjue, the words sounding like a thought spoken aloud.

"Little brothers can be difficult to manage," said Meng Yao. "The moment you look away, a disaster happens."

"Never trust the quiet," agreed Nie Mingjue.

"The quiet means the disaster has already happened," said Meng Yao.

Nie Mingjue smiled, the rays of setting sun illuminated his face in a way that made Meng Yao's breath catch.

"We should set back," said Nie Mingjue, not yet moving.

"But there is such a beautiful view! I'm sure our parents can keep our brothers from burning down the sect in our absence," said Meng Yao. That was a lie. He couldn't trust his mother not to encourage Wei Ying to burn down the sect.

Nie Mingjue sighed. "My father says I don't know how to relax… He is right. I come here sometimes just to think and enjoy the view, but I never can stop thinking about the sect, and all the things I have to do, and whatever mischief Huaisang could be up to while I'm away…"

Meng Yao could relate.

"It feels like if you stop even for a moment everything will fall apart and it will be your fault," he said, words bitterly true on his tongue.

"Exactly!" Nie Mingjue said with a strangely gleeful tone. "You know this feeling, huh?"

"Yes. Sometimes it's helpful to have a distraction, something useful but not too important that you can occupy yourself with," said Meng Yao. "That's why I enjoy cooking."

"I don't think I ever had something like that."

"Not even as a child? Wasn't there anything you liked to do?" asked Meng Yao.

Nie Mingjue was silent for a long time. "I used to do those… projects with Huaisang's mother. We would arrange rocks, flowers and figurines in a box, so they would resemble a little scenery."

How cute!

“That’s a good hobby. Kind of like penjing[2]. You could try it,” said Meng Yao.

“I don’t have the time.”

“Perhaps when you retire,” joked Meng Yao. It fell flat with Nie Mingjue turning silent. Perhaps he got thoughtful again.

Meng Yao moved slightly, so he would sit closer to Nie Mingjue. Sharing food was step thirty, so it was early, but he had such a convenient opportunity.

“Want a bao?” asked Meng Yao taking out a treat out of his sleeve. “They gave me two for a reason.”

“It was made by a criminal,” said Nie Mingjue, his tone mistrustful.

“But his little brother made the filling.”

“Fine. Give it here.” Meng Yao handed him the bag before he changed his mind. So Nie Mingjue was weak to cute children. Meng Yao could work with that. Unfortunately Xue Yang wouldn’t be a great help here.

Meng Yao bit into the bao’s cold but still soft side. Red bean paste[3]. He could feel that annoying blush creep on his face again.

“Are you cold?” asked Nie Mingjue with concern. “Sit closer to me.”

He drew Meng Yao firmly to his side. They were so close now that Meng Yao could feel Nie Mingjue breath in and out. Meng Yao begged his traitorous heart to behave.

“Your robes are too thin for Qinghe winters,” said Nie Mingjue in a paternal way Meng Yao found endearing. “I will look through the storage. There have to be some of my old robes you and your brothers can wear. Huaisang refuses to take any of my old clothes, says I have no taste.”

Meng Yao smiled at the horizon. The sun had already set but it didn’t feel like Nie Mingjue was in any hurry to leave. It truly was a wonderful day.

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[1] The sweet dumplings (汤圆, tāngyuán) Meng Yao makes are a traditional food, often associated with family reunions and festivals. Their round shape symbolizes wholeness and togetherness. return to text ↩

[2] Penjing is the ancient Chinese art of creating miniature, meticulously shaped landscapes in containers, often referred to as "tray scenery" or "living sculptures". return to text ↩

[3] Red bean paste, made from azuki beans, is a deeply symbolic food in China representing luck, health, and protection against evil spirits. The paste is traditionally eaten during winter

to ward off illness and in celebrations for prosperity. That's what makes it a natural choice for the filling of the sweet dumplings Meng Yao made for Xue Yang.

However, when he was eating the baos with red bean paste together with Nie Mingjue, Meng Yao thought of another symbolic meaning of red bean paste: longing, enduring love. It was often used in poetry to describe yearning.return to text ↩

Chapter 31: Reunion.

The interviews with the relatives of people from Shen Jiu's list didn't go as well as he hoped they would. Apparently people were not eager to speak to a stranger about their dead family members even on the Sect Leader's orders.

He initially thought that he could take at least five interviews a day. However, he hadn't accounted for the fact that he would have to pry answers out of people like a physician pulling teeth. He had to rephrase the same question several times to finally get the details he needed, and he couldn't ask personal questions at all without people clamming up. Shen Jiu could manage no more than two interviews a day before his patience ran out.

The results were not worth the meandering drudgery of the interrogation. He had spent hours reviewing his notes but was unable to find any pattern worth mentioning.

Shen Jiu often found himself wishing that Meng Yao would be there to help with the interviews but he suspected that being asked invasive questions by a literal child would not make people more open. In desperation, Shen Jiu even considered asking Nie Hongyi for help, but then he decided he would rather eat a slug.

"How are the interviews going?" asked the Sect Leader one evening. He had started a routine of invading Shen Jiu's space twice a week to ask him about his non-existent progress. It was extremely annoying.

"Fine," Shen Jiu gritted out. "When I make progress, I'll come to you myself. By coming here to pester me, you only waste my time, which I could be spending on research."

"If you don't have enough time, you could shorten Huaisang's lessons. I'm sure he could draw and read poetry without your supervision," said Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu glared at him. Unlike his research, Nie Huaisang was progressing rapidly.

"Is that what you think we do everyday?" Well, they did, but it was only a part of their lessons.

"That's all he talks about," said Nie Hongyi with a shrug.

"I don't need more time, I need a breakthrough," snapped Shen Jiu. "I'll focus on diaries for now. They are more reliable than people's memories."

"I could give you my father's diaries," offered Nie Hongyi. "He isn't on your list, but he kept a thorough account of everything that was going on in the time he lived, so there could be something useful. You'd have to read a lot of trite musings though."

"That would be helpful. If that's all, you can leave now," said Shen Jiu, returning to his notes.

Nie Hongyi laughed. “Sorry, but it’s not all. I’ve received a letter from Jiang Fengmian this morning.”

Shen Jiu raised his eyes immediately. “What does he want?”

“He wants my permission to visit the Impure Realm. Together with his wife and children, which is… an interesting choice.”

“What’s so interesting about it?” deflected Shen Jiu, reeling. It couldn’t be a coincidence. Did Meng Yao do something? What could he even do to cause this?

“Well, Jiang Fengmian and I are cordial but not close enough to warrant family visits. His heir isn’t even fifteen yet, is he? So, I assume they want to see you. It’s strange that he wants to bring his wife though.”

“And what’s so strange about it?” asked Shen Jiu dangerously, daring the man to repeat any of those rumors he had definitely heard.

“The first thing I learned about you when I made inquiries about a cultivator named Shen Shi, was that you duelled the Violet Spider and almost won. It didn’t sound like a friendly spar even.”

“We have sorted it out,” grit out Shen Jiu.

“Is that so? I’ll give Jiang Fengmian a go-ahead then,” said Nie Hongyi.

“Do whatever you want,” said Shen Jiu. He tried to figure out how Meng Yao could have made this happen. Jiang Fengmian couldn’t just have decided to visit on a whim, could he? So it had to be Meng Yao’s work.

“This is for you by the way,” said Nie Hongyi, giving Shen Jiu a letter.

“Are you an errand boy now?” grumbled Shen Jiu as he opened the letter. Jiang Fengmian surely wrote a lot. Shen Jiu didn’t see the point of writing such a long letter if the man was going to visit in person soon.

“I thought the fewer people see this letter the better. With all the rumors about the two of you, we’d better not add fuel to the fire,” said Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu scoffed. “As if anything could make them worse at this point. What are you waiting for? Don’t you have anything important to do?”

“You certainly treat me as an errand boy,” said Nie Hongyi dramatically. He did take his leave after that so Shen Jiu counted it as a win.

'I was happy to learn of your employment...' Shen Jiu skipped the paragraph. *'A man of noble and admirable character...'* Empty pleasantries, skip. '*... a tragedy that you departed before the swords commissioned for the three of you were complete...'* That was a bold-faced lie, but at least Jiang Fengmian began to get to the point. *‘...disciples of rare skill and talent… a big loss for the Jiang sect… unfortunate circumstances….’* Shen Jiu sighed.

He forced himself to read the useless, pleasant drivel that followed until he finally got to the only sentence that contained substance: the request for the names to engrave on the swords. In Shen Jiu's humble opinion it was the only useful part of the letter and the rest should have been scrapped.

The mention of swords in Jiang Fengmian's letter erased any lingering doubt in Shen Jiu's mind: this was Meng Yao's doing. However, after his mistake with Xue Yang and the caramels he didn't want to accuse the boy directly, so Shen Jiu decided to start with Wei Ying.

"What is this mess?" asked Shen Jiu, wrinkling his nose at the sight of Wei Ying's room. The table was a chaos of spilled ink and stray talismans, which could easily blow the whole room up if Wei Ying accidentally brushed one with his sleeves. Books lay strewn across the floor and bed, while dirty robes were draped over the partition screen.

"Shizun!" beamed Wei Ying from his place in the middle of the mess. Shen Jiu noticed a food tray with dirty dishes by the boy's feet and had to take a moment to quell the urge to scream. It never worked with Wei Ying, so it would just waste Shen Jiu's time.

"Do the servants not clean your room?" asked Shen Jiu, doing his best to keep his voice composed.

"Oh, I told them not to do that. They move things around and then I can't find anything."

"Just ask them not to touch the table," said Shen Jiu.

"But what else is there to clean?" asked Wei Ying, genuinely confused.

What did Shen Jiu do in his past life to deserve this? Let Meng Yao deal with this.

"Just ensure you don't set the table on fire by accident. Didn't I tell you how to store finished talismans?" asked Shen Jiu.

"That was only one time," said Wei Ying. "Well, if you don't count last week… but I put that one out so fast there aren't even any scorch marks! See?"

Wei Ying shuffled the papers to demonstrate, sending a brush rolling off the table. It left a dark trail in its wake. He smeared it with his sleeve before retrieving the brush. Shen Jiu pinched the bridge of his nose.

"I received a letter from Jiang Fengmian today," he said. "Did you or A-Yao write to Lotus Pier recently?"

"We did! Though Yao-he said that writing to Shijie directly isn't proper so we had to send her letters through Jiang Cheng. It's so stupid. She writes to that stuck-up peacock all the time, and nobody has a problem with that!"

"He is her fiancé, Wei Ying. Have you forgotten that?"

“That’s what Yao-ge said, but aren’t friends more important than fiancés? She didn’t even choose him herself! If Shijie was choosing who to marry, I’m sure she’d pick Yao-ge!”

Shen Jiu had no idea how to express to Wei Ying how little he cared, so he just changed the topic. “And did either of you write to Jiang Fengmian?”

“Yao-ge said it was only polite that I write him because he was so close with my parents and stuff,” said Wei Ying.

“What exactly did you write him?”

“I just told him about the things we saw on the road and about the Nie sect.”

“Did A-Yao suggest what you should write?”

Wei Ying looked startled for a moment. “What? No, why would he?”

“So he didn’t check your letter to make sure you didn’t offend the Sect Leader?” asked Shen Jiu.

Wei Ying faltered. “Of course, he did that. I just forgot.”

“Did you by any chance mention needing a proper spiritual weapon?”

“Probably. I told Uncle Jiang that I got my golden core, so I could have written that I wish I had a sword I could fly on.”

“Did you or did you not.”

“I don’t remember,” said Wei Ying. Shen Jiu was getting really tired of this.

“The Jiangs are coming to the Unclean Realm to deliver our swords. I am considering confining you and A-Yao to your rooms for the duration of their visit,” said Shen Jiu.

Wei Ying sputtered. “But Shizun! We didn’t do anything wrong!”

“You were plotting behind my back. Do you two think yourself clever? If you were really smart, you would know better than that!”

“What else were we supposed to do?!” asked Wei Ying suddenly loud. Then he continued lowering his voice. “Nie Mingjue won’t let me join the night hunts because I don’t have my sword yet. Yao-ge gets to go but all he can do is clean the battlefield and provide first aid.”

Shen Jiu frowned. Framed that way, he could understand their impatience. He had been young once, annoyed with his own teacher for not hurrying to grant him a sword. It had been demeaning to be among the oldest disciples still without one, even if he hadn’t been ready. Unlike him, Meng Yao and Wei Ying had been ready for some time.

“You still shouldn’t have gone behind my back,” said Shen Jiu.

“But didn’t Yao-ge ask you?”

That was unfortunately true. Shen Jiu didn’t have much to say in his defense other than that he was busy with research and writing to Jiang Fengmian felt like a chore.

“Well, if you went to such trouble to get your swords, you’d better have prepared names for them. I won’t wait for you to decide,” said Shen Jiu, shifting the topic.

Wei Ying’s eyes widened, and he began rummaging through the papers on his table.

“Here,” he said, handing Shen Jiu a long list. “I couldn’t choose, so you can just pick one. They’re all cool!”

Shen Jiu had forgotten that Wei Ying’s sword had that ridiculous name in the book. He scanned the list: Xuenu written as ‘Blood rage’, Chirou as ‘Meateater’, Molu as ‘The Final Road’, Sizhi as ‘Death’s Finger’… On second thought, ‘Suibian’ wasn’t the worst option [1].

After leaving Wei Ying’s room, Shen Jiu felt a cloud of dread gathering. He had to speak to Meng Yao. He wanted to speak to him. But it felt like every recent conversation only drove them further apart.

Perhaps Meng Yao had finally realized what a worthless, wretched person Shen Jiu was. He couldn’t even fulfill his duties as a teacher, having to rely on Jiang Fengmian’s generosity. Could he even be called Meng Yao’s parent? The boy didn’t know the truth. He hardly owed Shen Jiu any loyalty based on blood alone. They were just two people thrown together by the whims of fate.

Shen Jiu paused just before throwing the door open. He longed for the times their conversations were simple and he could just relax and go with the flow. Now he had to think of his every move lest he make things worse. Shen Jiu knocked.

Meng Yao looked surprised to see him. Shen Jiu rarely bothered with knocking when it came to his disciples and Meng Yao wasn’t an exception.

“Did something happen, Mother?” asked Meng Yao, a hint of worry in his voice. “You seem out of sorts.”

“Jiang Fengmian has written. He and his family will bring us our swords soon,” said Shen Jiu.

Meng Yao made a show of being pleasantly surprised. “I see! It’s good news then.”

“You don’t have to pretend. I know that you arranged this together with A-Ying.” Meng Yao opened his mouth to defend himself but Shen Jiu didn’t let him get a word in. “I don’t appreciate you going behind my back but otherwise… you did well.”

“Pardon me?” asked Meng Yao, baffled.

“You got us our swords for free and even saved my pride from having to ask Jiang Fengmian for a favor. It was an elegant solution,” said Shen Jiu honestly.

“But aren’t you angry with me?” asked Meng Yao softly. He looked younger now, less guarded. Shen Jiu felt his heart clench.

“I was initially, but it seems like I only have myself to blame. I didn’t fulfill my duty as your teacher and when you raised the issue I kept postponing finding a solution. I cannot blame anyone but myself for that.”

Meng Yao’s eyes were wide. “Mother, don’t be so harsh with yourself! I knew you would get us our swords eventually, I just… I just wanted to prove that I am useful I suppose.” His voice wobbled at the end of the sentence and Shen Jiu was terrified to see a glisten of tears in Meng Yao’s eyes.

“Useful? You’re too useful at times. I’m your parent so it’s my responsibility to take care of you, not the other way around.”

“I don’t want to be a burden anymore. If I can help you in any way, I will. Didn’t you sacrifice enough for me?”

The word “burden” sliced at Shen Jiu like a knife. Who could think of Meng Yao as a burden?

“What burden are you talking about?” Shen Jiu asked, the word sharp in his mouth. “You are my greatest achievement. Don’t call yourself a burden ever again.”

Meng Yao nodded, his eyes even shinier than before. Shen Jiu rushed to change the topic. “I hope you thought of a name for your sword? I need to send it to Jiang Fengmian.”

“Changsheng[2],” said Meng Yao quietly. “That’s what I chose.”

Shen Jiu nodded. “A powerful name. It will do.”

After that he went back to his rooms to write a short letter to Jiang Fengmian. His hand paused over the paper for a second before he wrote Xiu Ya[3]. It wouldn’t be the same, of course, but he couldn’t imagine calling his sword by any other name.

When the letter was ready, Shen Jiu remembered to check the Lore Points. His conversation with A-Yao finally got him the final push past eight hundred. Twelve hundred points to go. Shen Jiu sighed, rubbing his brow. He still wasn’t sure that he wanted to know why Qi-ge didn’t come for him.

The Jiangs soon wrote them back, confirming that they would arrive in a month. Shen Jiu spent this time studying and cross-referencing the diaries of the previous sect leader, which were… extensive.

Shen Jiu didn’t know why a Sect Leader would waste time on recording their day with mind-numbing detail, but this man even described the weather. Shen Jiu got a laugh out of it the first time the man wrote that it was so cold piss turned to ice before it hit the ground, but by the third time he saw it the turn of phrase lost its crude charm.

The good thing about the amount of detail was that the Sect Leader wrote about other people as well. This allowed Shen Jiu to fill some gaps in the biographies of the men he was investigating. He noted with curiosity that most were described as unpleasant, dour, and bad-tempered. However, one seemed like a cheerful person.

"I envy my cousin in his rare ability to shed horrors and adversity like a duck sheds water from its plumage," wrote the former Sect Leader. "No matter what hardships life throws at him, Bohou always has a joke on his tongue."

Shen Jiu had to go through several years of notes before he found one mentioning the man's death. *"I don't know how it happened,"* Nie Hongyi's father wrote. *"We know to watch for the signs of deviation in those who anger easily and hold onto grudges, but there was no reason for worry here. We were on a night hunt together two days ago and I've seen Bohou kill a beast with my own eyes."*

He went back to reread the note from two days prior. *"This hunt got us a core for a new saber that will likely go to Zhizhou's son. For a moment, I worried about Bohou. His son would also receive his saber this year if he had lived. To my relief he was the one who called for celebration, and he ended up outdrinking both me and Zhizhou."*

Shen Jiu thought that it was significant, that the answer was close, but slipping out of his hands. He put Nie Bohou in a separate list, writing down all the details he found. He was going to consult Nie Hongyi, but then their investigation was interrupted by the arrival of the Jiangs.

It was a dreadful day. The winter had begun to loosen its clutches, giving way to spring. However, everything was now wet and still too cold, so Shen Jiu preferred to stay inside.

"Do you have to be here," whispered Shen Jiu to Nie Hongyi when they were waiting for the Jiang delegation outside together with their children. Shen Jiu had to be there because the Jiangs were doing him a favor. Nie Hongyi, however, was too important to welcome guests personally.

"I don't want to miss the show."

"What show?" asked Shen Jiu, feeling his blood pressure rise.

Nie Hongyi didn't answer because Wei Ying screamed, "They are here!" excitedly, distracting everyone.

"Jiang Cheng!" screamed Wei Ying, before the Jiangs even landed. He jumped around like a maniac, waving at his friend, who seemed to have gotten his own sword since they had seen him last. "Shijie!" Jiang Yanli smiled at them from behind her mother's back.

"Wei Ying, calm yourself before I do it for you," hissed Shen Jiu. The boy didn't seem affected but he stopped in one place and shut up, so Shen Jiu was satisfied.

"Sect Leader Nie," greeted Jiang Fengmian, a genial smile on his face. "Madam Shen," his smile brightened slightly.

They all exchanged the necessary formalities. Even Yu Ziyuan was civil, not commenting when Jiang Fengmian congratulated Wei Ying and Meng Yao on acquiring their golden cores. After years of barely concealed disdain, it felt new.

“You seem to have settled in well,” said Jiang Fengmian as soon as it was polite to address Shen Jiu. “I’m glad that… you found a secure place here.”

There was some melancholy in his voice.

“Tomorrow we will conduct a proper sword giving ceremony for the three of you,” said Yu Ziyuan loudly. “This might not be entirely traditional but we will make an attempt at something proper.”

Shen Jiu stared at her for a moment, baffled.

“We thank you for going out of your way for our sake,” said Meng Yao.

“It’s the least we can do,” said Jiang Fengmian. His wife scoffed.

“Sect Leader Jiang, Madam Yu, let me take you to your lodgings so you can rest before the welcoming feast,” said Nie Mingjue. “Yue Yao, can you show Young Mistress Jiang and Young Master Jiang the rooms we have prepared for them?”

There was no hint of surprise on Meng Yao’s face when he nodded, smiling. “Of course. Please, follow me.” Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang also joined the children’s procession, beginning to whisper among themselves the moment they walked far away not to be heard by adults.

Shen Jiu watched his son’s retreating back with narrowed eyes. It was unusual for someone who wasn’t even an official guest disciple to be allowed to take care of a delegation from another sect. A demonstration of great favor and trust from Nie Mingjue.

Shen Jiu wasn’t sure how to feel about it. Nie Mingjue wasn’t like Liu Qingge in many ways, as a person he was quite tolerable in fact unlike Shen Jiu’s former shidi, but knowing what happened in the books… He would have to speak to Meng Yao about it. Find better words to explain what the issue was.

“It’s going to be a fun feast,” said Nie Hongyi once the Jiangs were out of sight.

“Shut up,” hissed Shen Jiu.

He wished he could miss this feast altogether, but it would be too much of an offense, so he had to go. The event was just as loud and oppressive as the one Shen Jiu had to attend before, but with an added undercurrent of Jiang family bullshit.

“We thank you for taking such good care of Madam Shen, Sect Leader Nie,” said Jiang Fengmian once the formalities were dealt with and they began to eat.

“Madam Shen would have my hide if I dared to treat her badly,” quipped Nie Hongyi. “There is no beast as terrifying as a scorned woman.”

Shen Jiu wasn't exactly a woman but even he felt offended. For a moment, he met eyes with Yu Ziyuan, feeling strange solidarity.

"Madam Shen possesses a rare teaching talent so we are lucky to have her as my brother's teacher," said Nie Mingjue. Shen Jiu noticed Meng Yao smile and whisper something to Jiang Yanli.

"Her skill as a teacher is only one talent Madam Shen possesses," said Yu Ziyuan suddenly. "Both my husband and I treasured her counsel."

Shen Jiu had no idea what was going on.

"My wife is correct," said Jiang Fengmian, though a slight uncertainty in his voice indicated he, too, was confused by her behavior. "Madam Shen is knowledgeable and wise."

"I assure you that Madam Shen's talents weren't unnoticed," said Nie Hongyi, amusement coloring his words. Then he was merciful enough to change the topic to politics. Shen Jiu wasn't sure he could take it if they kept praising him in this strange way.

"This is Xue Yang," said Shen Jiu the moment Jiang Fengmian tried to approach. He put the brat in front of him, using him as a living shield. "My newest disciple."

Meng Yao had decided against bringing Xue Yang to greet the Jiangs upon arrival, but there wasn't keeping him away from the feast.

Jiang Fengmian looked down at the scowling brat with dog-like confusion. "Ah, Madam Shen, you certainly are charitable." His tone of voice betrayed how little he believed his own words. Jiang Fengmian knew Shen Jiu well enough to know that "charitable" wasn't the right word to describe him.

"Charitable? I'm the charitable one," said Xue Yang. "Who else would take a master with no sword?"

Shen Jiu choked on his own spit. "Oh when I'm done with you, we will see who will be charitable enough to take a disciple with no tongue! Get out of my sight!"

Xue Yang scoffed in a strangely familiar way and walked to Wei Ying and Nie Huaisang who were busy entertaining Jiang Cheng at the moment. This could only end in a disaster.

"What a spirited boy," said Jiang Fengmian his smile fixed.

"He is an ungrateful little brat. That's what he is."

The melancholy returned to Jiang Fengmian's eyes. "The Nie sect is a good fit for you. You seem… freer, if that's the right word."

Shen Jiu thought of it for a bit. He was less worried about his position with the Nie, that was true. There was no displeased mistress, and Nie Hongyi seemed to find his personality amusing so Shen Jiu hardly had to filter himself. The Sect Leader was also aware of his past and in possession of his own dark secret that Shen Jiu could use against him if needed.

“I suppose it does feel freeing,” said Shen Jiu. He had always hated being a charity case, and here he was the one doing the Nie a favor.

“I wish…” started Jiang Fengmian.

“Husband, have you told Madam Shen of A-Cheng’s progress?” interrupted Yu Ziyuan.

“No, I…”

“She has to be curious. He was her student for a while.”

“I see that Jiang Cheng got his golden core,” said Shen Jiu, allowing Yu Ziyuan to change the topic.

“Just a month after Yue Yao and Wei Ying got theirs from what I’ve heard,” said Jiang Fengmian, his voice proud.

“Do you have to compare our son to others?” hissed Yu Ziyuan.

“I wasn’t comparing them,” said Jiang Fengmian helplessly.

“Then what was that?”

“A simple observation.”

Watching this exchange reminded Shen Jiu of hundreds of similar ones. Yue Qingyuan would say something and Shen Jiu would choose to interpret his words in the worst possible way. A lot of the time he did it on purpose, punishing the man for daring to speak to him and to remind him of his existence.

“I hope you aren’t trying to steal Madam Shen back from me,” said Nie Hongyi jovially. Judging from the shine of his eyes he was well in his cups, but Shen Jiu was glad to see him anyway. The Jiangs wouldn’t want to have their marital spats in front of him.

“Just discussing my former students’ progress,” said Shen Jiu. “You have told me of Jiang Cheng but how is Jiang Yanli faring?”

“As well as can be expected with her weak constitution,” said Yu Ziyuan.

“She was a great help during our recent negotiation with Tingshan He. Sect Leader He was very impressed with her contribution,” Jiang Fengmian said.

“It’s not something that will serve her well once she is wed. The Jin prefer to keep their wives away from politics,” said Yu Ziyuan somewhat bitterly.

“The engagement isn’t set in stone,” said Jiang Fengmian with a placid smile. Yu Ziyuan glared at him.

“If it falls through there won’t be any lack of suitors for your daughter,” said Nie Hongyi. “Even I am in need for a shrewd daughter-in-law.“

“We would like to have stronger ties to Qinghe Nie,” said Jiang Fengmian. “Our sects have more in common than can be told at a glance. A certain freedom of spirit if I might say so.”

“There are other ways to tie our sects other than by marrying our children,” said Yu Ziyuan. “For instance, Madam Shen might as well be my husband’s sister. Did you know that her mother was his nanny?”

“Madam Shen didn’t tell me much about her past,” said Nie Hongyi, giving Shen Jiu a strange look. Shen Jiu would probably have to explain Meng Shi’s origin as Jiang Fengmian imagined it later. What a chore.

“It’s too hot in here. I need to get some air,” lied Shen Jiu, extracting himself from the conversation.

“Let me accompany you, Madam Shen,” said Yu Ziyuan. “It’s been a while since we had an opportunity to spend time together.”

Shen Jiu didn’t grace this with an answer as he walked outside, hearing Yu Ziyuan follow him.

“I don’t know what game you’re playing,” he said when they were alone, breathing in the damp cold air of Qinghe evening.

“I’m not playing games. Being publicly civil is good for our reputations after everything that happened,” said Yu Ziyuan dryly.

“Now you care about our reputations? Good to know,” said Shen Jiu. He wanted to be alone but instead he had to entertain the warped copy of his past self. He should have stuck to Nie Hongyi’s side.

“I’m not here to fight,” said Yu Ziyuan. “I don’t like to admit it but you did me a favor. I want to pay it back.”

“You already brought swords for me and my disciples. I think that makes us even.”

“Then call this atonement. That trial started many rumors about you. I have a way to clean your name.”

“Go on,” said Shen Jiu, cautiously.

“If we push forward the idea that you and my husband are as good as siblings, that will not only quell some of the rumors, but also open new marriage opportunities for you. Sect Leader Nie seems amenable to the idea…”

“I’m not getting married,” interrupted Shen Jiu.

Yu Ziyuan looked at him as if he were stupid, “Marrying a sect leader would not only protect you from your past but secure the positions of your children. The Nie are respected enough that even Jin Guangshan wouldn’t dare say anything.”

Shen Jiu felt cold. “You know?”

“Of course, I know. I have investigated you thoroughly before the trial.”

“I assumed that if you’d known, you would have said something,” said Shen Jiu.

“I wasn’t going to hurt my friend needlessly. She bears enough shame from her husband’s proclivities already.”

“He isn’t going to say anything either way. What sane man would admit to having a bastard?” said Shen Jiu.

“With Jin Guangshan you never know,” said Yu Ziyuan with visible disgust. “He gets possessive of his conquests if they walk away.”

“I didn’t walk away. He got bored of me,” said Shen Jiu, hoping that he was right. “I’m sure he won’t even recognise my face.”

Yu Ziyuan gave him a long look as if studying his face. “I wouldn’t be so sure.”

What was that supposed to mean? “Well, I am sure and I won’t be getting married so you better forget this idea.”

He turned around to walk back to the feasts.

“If it’s about the rumors, you should know better than listen to them,” said Yu Ziyuan, making Shen Jiu stop. “Nie Hongyi bears no blame for what happened to his wives.”

Shen Jiu turned back. “Do you know what actually happened?”

“No, but I’ve seen them together. He wouldn’t have hurt them. There was… love in their union, everybody who knew them personally could see it. The rumors were planted by those who wish to paint the Nie as barbarians capable of killing their own family in a bout of rage.”

So Nie Hongyi was rumored to have murdered his wives. Shen Jiu couldn’t imagine him doing it, but men could do all kinds of despicable things you couldn’t imagine them doing. And if Nie Hongyi hadn’t killed his wives, then who did? Shen Jiu would have to investigate that.

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[1] Suíbiàn (随便) – "Whatever / As You Please". return to text ↩

[2] Changsheng (长生) – "Longevity / Eternal Life". It’s meant to echo Jin Gunagyao’s canon sword Hensheng (恨生) – "Hatred of Life / Birth of Resentment". return to text ↩

[3] Xiu Ya (修雅): "Cultivating Elegance / Elegant Cultivation" return to text ↩

Chapter 32: Women and men.

Even after Shen Jiu returned to the feast, he couldn't get Yu Ziyuan's words out of his head: "Nie Hongyi bears no blame for what happened to his wives," she had said, but she couldn't know for sure. Shen Jiu knew better than to trust a man's benevolence blindly.

"They are not yet fifteen! Drinking alcohol at such a young age can only teach them bad habits[1]!" Nie Mingjue's barking voice cut through the noise like a blade.

Shen Jiu walked over, the familiar ache already blooming behind his eyes.

"Lighten up, Jue-er[2], there is no harm in getting loose sometimes," said Nie Hongyi, an open wine jar in his grip. It was difficult to see this ridiculous man as a villain of someone else's story. But appearances could be deceiving. Even Qiu Jianluo could play the role of a caring older brother well.

"A sip of wine won't hurt anyone," agreed Jiang Fengmian, his face slightly flushed from alcohol. Nie Hongyi didn't waste time plying his fellow sect leader with wine. Not that he needed to try hard. Jiang Fengmian was a lightweight.

"A sip is enough to pave the way to debauchery," said Nie Mingjue, crossing his arms. He stood in front of the children's table, his body a wall between his father and the boys.

"Debauchery?" repeated Nie Hongyi, outraged. "Don't send your son to the Cloud Recesses, Fengmian. Look what Lan Qiren did to my Mingjue!"

"Did he enrich Young Master Nie's vocabulary?" asked Shen Jiu. "If it's hard for you to understand, it might help to get a dictionary."

Nie Hongyi turned to face him. Shen Jiu could see the moment he understood the insult, because a smile bloomed on the man's face. "You hurt me, Madam Shen, truly you do."

Shen Jiu didn't have a response to that. He was used to people getting offended by his comments. Nie Hongyi's unexplainable delight threw him off.

"Shizun, can we have a sip of wine?" asked Wei Ying innocently.

"No," said Shen Jiu. "Wine makes people stupid. Stay away from it."

"Is it another way of calling me stupid?" Nie Hongyi pressed, embracing the wounded act.

The children laughed. Nie Mingjue did not. His face was stony and stubborn, and he watched his father as if expecting something. Did he wait for Nie Hongyi to try pouring wine again, or was it more sinister? Had Nie Hongyi raised his hand to his children before?

"If you have to ask, the wine is working," said Yu Ziyuan, distracting Shen Jiu from his anxious thoughts.

“Brutal. Absolutely brutal,” complained Nie Hongyi dramatically. “I don’t know how those two haven’t eaten you alive, Fengmian.”

“I suppose they took mercy on me,” said Jiang Fengmian, his eyes shining with… something. Something sentimental surely.

Shen Jiu scoffed. Yu Ziyuan scoffed at the same time as he did, and that made him regret scoffing in the first place.

“Let’s make another toast!” Nie Hongyi said. “The four of us together. Ladies, you’ve hardly drunk anything. Let me pour you some wine!”

It was only proper to agree. Shen Jiu considered refusing on principle, but Nie Hongyi poured him a cup with a warm smile and suddenly the wine didn’t seem like a bad idea. At least it would make his thoughts less sharp, wrapping them in cotton.

One cup only. Enough to make him relaxed enough to endure the feast, but not enough to make him lose control.

“Let’s drink to friendship!” roared Nie Hongyi. The rest of the Nie disciples in the room echoed their sect leader’s toast, taking their cups. The wine was rather potent, making Shen Jiu wish he had diluted it with water.

Conversation soon became inane. Jiang Fengmian spilled his wine as he laughed at a story about a three-legged tiger and an old goat. Nie Hongyi refilled his cup and then refilled it again. Shen Jiu nursed his own wine, watching for an opening. Drunk men had loose tongues, so all he needed was to ask the right questions in the opportune moment.

"I think it's time we retired," said Yu Ziyuan hours later. Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao had already wrangled the children to bed.

“The night is still young!” complained Nie Hongyi. “It’s not every day old friends gather!”

The more he drank, the friendlier he became. If before the feast Shen Jiu hadn’t seen any particular closeness between the two, now Nie Hongyi treated Jiang Fengmian as his bosom friend.

“We had a long flight,” said Yu Ziyuan. Shen Jiu glanced at Jiang Fengmian: the man was wobbling, his gaze unfocused. A complete disgrace.

“Let them rest,” said Shen Jiu. “I will keep you company.”

Nie Hongyi clutched at his chest. “Oh, A-Shi[3], I knew you cared for me. Somewhere deep in that cold heart of yours!”

Shen Jiu’s jaw tightened at the term of endearment. Was it a drunken levity or an attempt at intimacy? The thought of Nie Hongyi having such designs on him made Shen Jiu ill. But the man was drunk, and drunk men said foolish things. Usually.

“Don’t call me that,” said Shen Jiu, keeping his voice level.

“Now you are cruel again! So cute but so cold… How can I bear it!”

The theatrical manner suddenly reminded Shen Jiu of Nie Huaisang. He supposed that the boy had to learn his tricks from somewhere.

“Is everything alright, Madam Shen?” asked Nie Mingjue. The young man had returned after taking care of the children, hovering in his father’s shadow like an unusually anxious statue.

“It’s fine,” said Shen Jiu. “You can retire. I’m sure you have training tomorrow.”

“Are you sure?” Nie Mingjue didn’t move, glancing at his father’s lax figure with a pained expression.

The boy had gotten used to managing his father. Was he trying to protect Shen Jiu from something or was he simply afraid of his father making a disgrace of himself? In any case, Nie Mingjue would get in the way if he stayed.

“I am sure,” he said. “Goodnight, Young Master Nie.”

Nie Mingjue hesitated. Then he bowed, stiffly, and retreated.

He let Nie Hongyi talk. The Sect Leader's speech was repetitive, slurred, looping endlessly around old hunting tales and humorous stories about other sect leaders. One story even involved Jin Guangshan being publicly slapped by his wife for accidentally calling her by the wrong name. Shen Jiu listened with half his attention, waiting for a moment to strike.

Around them, the feast dwindled. Disciples clustered in close circles, laughter low and lulling. The glow of candlelight softened hard edges.

The glances were impossible to miss. Disciples exchanged looks, lowering their voices when the Sect Leader laughed too loudly at his own story. Tomorrow, there would be rumors. Shen Jiu wondered whether it was a good price to pay for his peace of mind.

If Nie Hongyi truly did something to harm his wives, Shen Jiu would leave first thing in the morning.

“I don’t understand him,” said Nie Hongyi quietly. Somehow the conversation turned to his eldest son, switching the mood to something more somber. “Joyless, humorless. The only things he cares about are duty and responsibility.”

He stared into his empty cup.

“It’s impossible to live like this and not go insane.”

Shen Jiu chose his next words carefully. “He lost his mother at a young age, didn’t he? It had to be rough on him.”

The silence stretched.

Around them, the feast continued with its constant murmur of voices spiced with clatter. A sudden burst of far-away laughter rang over the noise.

“Yes, I reckon it was,” Nie Hongyi said. His voice was sober.

“You said he was nine when Huaisang's mother died.” Shen Jiu pressed, relentless. “What of his birth mother? Does he remember her?”

“I don’t know,” Nie Hongyi said. “I never asked.”

He put down his cup. “It’s late. I think it’s time we retired.”

Shen Jiu watched, fascinated despite himself, as Nie Hongyi put up a jovial mask again to wrap up the feast. His laughter sounded genuine when he announced the final toast. The farewells were warm and personal.

The disciples exchanged glances. The feast was ending early. Last time, they had drunk until dawn.

It was hard to be intimidated by Nie Hongyi when he was clearly trying to escape.

“Let me walk with you,” said Shen Jiu when Nie Hongyi was leaving. “We are going in the same direction after all.”

Nie Hongyi for once didn’t seem pleased with his presence. “I’m too tired to be good company,” he said curtly, but that didn’t dissuade Shen Jiu from following him.

Nie Hongyi walked with his gaze fixed forward, his jaw set. He would not spill secrets by accident. Shen Jiu would have to pry them out of him.

“It's a strange coincidence,” Shen Jiu said, his voice quiet, “for two of your wives to die in less than ten years.”

Nie Hongyi stopped walking.

“Should I be concerned for my safety?” Shen Jiu continued. He kept his voice light, almost curious. “The rumors say worrying things about you. Of course, if you won't speak, I'll have to draw my own conclusions.”

His words rang painfully true.

“No one outside Qinghe knows what truly happened. They can speculate all they want, but the Nie know how to keep their mouths shut when necessary,” Nie Hongyi said.

“Is that all?” Shen Jiu heard his own voice rise. “That's your defense? They speculate?”

He didn’t know what he expected to hear, but that wasn’t it.

“You want the truth? Ask Nie Lieyan… or better yet, ask that damned Gu Nianyuan. He will be happy to tell you of my failures!” said Nie Hongyi, his voice tense. “But don’t speak to me

of this ever again."

"I'm not asking you to give an account!" said Shen Jiu. "Just tell me how they died…"

"Suicide!" roared Nie Hongyi, making Shen Jiu step back instinctively. Nie Hongyi wore no mask now, his face twisted in a grimace of pain. "Two wives, both killed themselves. Did I drive them to it? I don't know! Perhaps I did! Perhaps I'm cursed." He laughed hollowly. "What is another curse for the Nie? Our whole bloodline is cursed!" He looked Shen Jiu in the eye. "If that makes you feel unsafe, you can just leave."

Nie Hongyi was not a tall man, but he was taller and broader than Shen Jiu, and his loud voice filled the narrow hallway until there was no room left to breathe.

In the dim light, his figure quickly blended in with all the other big and angry men in Shen Jiu's life.

There were so many of them. So different and yet the same.

He braced for the strike.

It did not come.

Nie Hongyi marched off, leaving Shen Jiu to stand alone in the empty hallway, trying to calm his rapidly beating heart. He stood there until he could no longer hear the echo of Sect Leader's footsteps.

Back in the safety of his rooms, Shen Jiu dragged his bedding to a safe corner, but it didn't help him relax. He kept glancing at the door.

It was irrational. Nie Hongyi had been drunk and angry, and even so, he didn't do anything but scream and walk away. There was no danger. Shen Jiu knew it, but the feeling of helplessness persisted.

Suicide looked bad, but it wasn't murder. Nie Hongyi could very well be innocent… or at least as innocent as a man could be. Nie Hongyi wasn't dangerous.

There was no need to flee.

If they left now, the children would be uprooted once again, and the mystery Shen Jiu wasted so much time on would be left unsolved… No, he didn't want to leave.

This admission wasn't easy, but it helped settle his nerves. If he didn't want to leave, all that was left was to keep investigating the matter.

Nie Hongyi did not come to the sword ceremony the next day.

Shen Jiu didn't expect him to. He had already locked himself up once, when Gu Nianyuan mentioned suicides. It had to be nice to be able to do that instead of silently enduring like all the less fortunate people had to do.

Nie Mingjue made excuses for his father, citing an urgent sect business, but his frown betrayed that something was amiss. Nobody pressed. A few disciples exchanged glances, but Nie Mingjue's stiff posture discouraged questions. Nie Hongyi wasn't necessarily needed for a ceremony led by the Jiangs, so his son could stand in to give it more gravitas.

A startling number of Nie disciples came to watch, whispering curiously. It must have been a novelty for them to see another sect's customs so close. Shen Jiu recognised several faces in the crowd, even Nie Zhenren came, though he was a bit of a recluse, missing both feasts Shen Jiu had been to.

The ceremony was unfamiliar to Shen Jiu, more relaxed than the stiff rituals of Cang Qiong and at the same time more of a public spectacle. In Cang Qiong, the dramatics were justified as it was a final exam that could end in disaster if a disciple overreached. Here, the ceremony was little more than gift-giving. Shen Jiu was not impressed.

"Today I bestow upon you a sword as elegant and refined as its wielder," said Jiang Fengmian, mirth in his eyes.

The blade was wrapped in a green silk cloth, but once it was revealed to his eyes, Shen Jiu felt them sting. It looked the same. How could it…

"Let Xiu Ya serve you faithfully," announced Jiang Fengmian for everybody to hear.

Shen Jiu had to swallow a lump in his throat before he could speak. "I, Shen Shi, accept this blade before Heaven, Earth, and the ancestral spirits. Let it be known as Xiu Ya. I vow to wield it righteously and to use it to protect those who cannot protect themselves."

The oath was trite and pretentious, and it seemed to drag forever because all he wanted was to get his hands on Xiu Ya. The hilt felt different in his now much smaller hand, but the song of spiritual energy echoed the same.

"Hello, old friend," Shen Jiu thought. Then he sent a pulse of spiritual energy into the sky.

Meng Yao received his sword with poise and grace that would be in place in the emperor's court. Shen Jiu allowed pride to bloom in his heart. His son was a fully-fledged cultivator now.

Even the gold gleam of Changsheng's hilt didn't darken his mood. He wondered whether it was Yu Ziyuan's idea or just an unpleasant coincidence.

Wei Ying's eyes widened when he heard the name of his sword, and he sent an exaggeratedly scandalised look Shen Jiu's way. He had enough composure not to say anything, but the boy was visibly fighting a laugh, and so was Jiang Fengmian.

Shen Jiu had enclosed the full list of names in his letter to Jiang Fengmian and quoted Wei Ying's flippant words. Then he added that Jiang Fengmian could do whatever he wanted but the name had to be respectful enough not to shame Shen Jiu's teachings with it.

The Sect Leader's sense of humor was as corny as ever, but at least Suiyi could be argued to have a profound meaning. It was even written as "Unrestrained Ease", not as "As you wish"[4]. Shen Jiu decided not to murder Jiang Fengmian for this.

At the end of the ceremony, Jiang Fengmian announced that it was time to try the newly forged swords in battle. Shen Jiu had expected the Sect Leader to challenge him to a friendly spar. Instead, Yu Ziyuan announced her intention to have a rematch.

"Swords only," she said. "I will not use Zidian if you don't use talismans."

Their last duel had ended inconclusively, so a rematch sounded good to Shen Jiu.

It was a harsh duel. Distracted by research, Shen Jiu had neglected his forms and he could feel the result in every ache of straining muscles. He could almost hear Liu Qingge's voice reprimanding him for his laziness every time he was too slow with an attack.

But Shen Jiu had spent years sparring against Jiang Fengmian. He knew how the Jiang cultivators moved, and he knew the weak points. Meanwhile, Yu Ziyuan had only once seen Qing Jing style in action, so she couldn't predict his moves. A single feint, timed perfectly, and her sword clattered to the ground.

Shen Jiu froze when the crowd began to roar its approval. That wasn't something he was used to.

"I would have won if I had used Zidian, of course," said Yu Ziyuan quietly as she put her sword back in its sheath. A sour loser like always.

"Of course, my lady," said Jiang Fengmian. Shen Jiu choked on his outrage. Way to diminish his win!

He was going to challenge Yu Ziyuan to another duel, this time with her precious whip. Let her try to explain away that loss.

While he was seething, Meng Yao stepped out to face the crowd. "Da-shixiong[5], would you do me the honor of allowing me to test my new sword against Baxia's might?"

It was a bold move. A quick loss would be shameful, but the win was unthinkable. Shen Jiu was proud of his son's skills, but Nie Mingjue had the advantage of age and experience on him, to say nothing of his size.

Shen Jiu watched Nie Mingjue step forward. It was impossible not to notice how he towered over Meng Yao. Shen Jiu's hands suddenly felt very cold, and he hid them in his sleeves, clutching at his own freezing fingers.

The two blades clashed. Meng Yao was thrown back, his footing skidding across the stone. Nie Mingjue had not held back. Of course, he hadn't. Men like him rarely knew how. Luckily for Meng Yao, Qing Jing style was well suited for fighting stronger opponents.

Baxia sliced through the air hairbreadth away from Meng Yao's face as the boy danced back like he was a leaf carried back by a gust of wind. Nie Mingjue smiled. Now there was more passion in his moves, turning a training spar into a duel.

There was clear skill on display, but the audience wasn't inclined to appreciate the elegance of evasion. "This Yue Yao is too wily for an honest fight. Real warriors face their opponents head-on," said somebody.

Shen Jiu's nails almost pierced his skin when he clenched his fists. He was used to hearing such comments about himself. He even learned to tolerate them, so people wouldn't complain to his Shizun that he was out of control and overreacting. But how dared those narrow-minded brutes criticise his brilliant, hard-working son?

Before Shen Jiu could tear into them, Nie Zhenren spoke up: "This boy is a twig compared to Mingjue. What idiot would try to win by strength alone in his position?"

Shen Jiu exhaled, his fists still clenched. Meng Yao wouldn't appreciate him making a scene, especially now that the critics were chastened. Shen Jiu could even hear some impressed whispers when Meng Yao did a backflip and almost managed to get behind Nie Mingjue. The Sect Heir still won, but the fight was long and impressive enough to make Meng Yao look formidable.

As Meng Yao stood there, with his sword on his hip, Shen Jiu was struck by the realisation that the boy had grown up. In one year, he would be fifteen and wouldn't need Shen Jiu anymore.

"We should train like that sometime," said Nie Mingjue, standing too close to Meng Yao for Shen Jiu's comfort. Those two were getting closer, despite his warnings. He had braced himself for the inevitable, but he still felt like there was something he could do.

Next up were Wei Ying and Jiang Cheng, a natural choice, though Shen Jiu felt it was a bit unfair to the Jiang heir. To lose his first public duel in another sect couldn't be good for the boy's self-esteem. That boy was just as much of a sore loser as his mother, which Shen Jiu remembered from teaching him.

The fight was quick, the boys' youth leaving little room for strategy. They wanted the rush of combat, not the satisfaction of well-matched game of qi. Still, it was entertaining to watch. They were better matched than Shen Jiu remembered, and Jiang Cheng refused to let Wei Ying press his advantage, countering with moves his father favored.

Seeing the strength of his opponent, Wei Ying was forced to use his wit, and Shen Jiu finally saw some of his own moves applied. The duel ended with two boys breathing heavily, Wei Ying's sword under Jiang Cheng's throat.

"You got stronger, Jiang Cheng!" said Wei Ying thoughtlessly.

Jiang Cheng's face reddened in indignation. "Next time I'll beat you. Just you wait!"

"Let's fight again soon!" said Wei Ying sincerely.

Jiang Fengmian declared the ceremony concluded. The crowd began to disperse, voices rising in animated discussion of the duels. Wei Ying did something to the sullen Jiang Cheng that made him chase the brat around, until they finally fell into a brawling pile. Xue Yang jumped in like a small dog whose owner was threatened. Shen Jiu had more important things to deal with than a childish brawl, so he walked past them.

Shen Jiu meant to speak to Nie Zhenren. The old blacksmith was still there, speaking to Nie Huaisang at the edge of the crowd. Those two seemed cordial, despite the fact that they weren't blood-related.

A large hand clasped him by the elbow, making Shen Jiu grab the knife he always carried with him.

"What on Earth did you say to Hongyi yesterday?" Shen Jiu recognised the voice, which saved Nie Lieyan the inconvenience of a knife in his gut.

"Unhand me," ordered Shen Jiu, glaring at the tall man. He didn't let go of the knife, ready to use it if the brute didn't listen.

The grip on his elbow released. Nie Lieyan immediately crossed his hands in front of his chest. While Nie Lieyan was Nie Hongyi's second in command, their paths didn't cross often. The man clearly didn't like Shen Jiu, and it was mutual, so they kept their distance.

"Last time I thought it was just a coincidence, but I saw you leave together last night. What have you done?"

What made that entitled man think he had the right to accuse Shen Jiu of anything?

Shen Jiu bristled. "It's not my fault your Sect Leader is as sensitive as a young maiden."

The words came out sharper than necessary.

"Have some respect, you wretch!" sputtered Nie Lieyan.

"What is going on here?" Nie Mingjue walked up to them with Meng Yao three steps behind him. The crowd had already dispersed, so their confrontation must have been noticeable. Perhaps Meng Yao was the one who asked the sect's heir to intervene. Now he waited for Nie Mingjue to solve the dispute, his face serene.

Did Meng Yao wish to protect his mother from a hostile man? Or was he afraid that Shen Jiu would make a scene?

If Shen Jiu complained, he was sure that Nie Mingjue would take his side. Women had certain privileges in situations like this, and Shen Jiu was not above using them. One word, and this interrogation would be over. However, Nie Lieyan possessed information that Shen Jiu needed.

"Your father instructed me to speak to Nie Lieyan about a certain matter," said Shen Jiu. "We couldn't agree on the place where we could discuss it privately."

“Let us take a walk,” said Nie Lieyan. His hand closed around Shen Jiu's sleeve, not his arm, this time, as if he had learned something. He tugged, hard, and Shen Jiu was pulled forward like a recalcitrant mule.

He didn’t fight it where the children could see, but the moment they were out of sight, Shen Jiu kicked Nie Lieyan in the back of his knee and tore his sleeve out of the man’s grip.

“Touch me again and I will kill you,” hissed Shen Jiu so he wouldn’t attract undue attention.

“I wasn’t touching you!” complained Nie Lieyan. “At least you know how to fight.”

What was that supposed to mean? Was it… a compliment?

Nie Lieyan wasn’t out of complaints yet. “You shouldn’t have lied to Mingjue. It’s dishonorable.”

“I wasn’t lying. Yesterday, Nie Hongyi told me to ask you how his wives died.” Shen Jiu just hadn’t planned to ask Nie Lieyan because he found him unlikeable.

Nie Lieyan flinched. “That’s what you asked him about?! No wonder! Why would you even ask somebody that?!”

“I was concerned with my safety,” said Shen Jiu primly. Their short walk took them to the edge of the Impure Realm, so now they had a good view of the horse manure pile next to the stable. A fitting view for current company in Shen Jiu’s opinion.

“What safety? Do you see yourself as a future Madam Nie?” asked Nie Lieyan suspiciously.

“I see myself as a person with a functional sense of self-preservation,” said Shen Jiu. “It might surprise you, but I have no use for marriage. That, however, doesn’t mean I want to stay in service of a man who is rumored to be violent.”

“All my cousin did wrong was let some passing fancy cloud his judgment. I told him that an outsider couldn’t make a good Nie wife! Even taking her as a concubine was a mistake.”

That had to be Nie Huaisang’s mother.

“What happened?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Nie Zhuli… Hongyi’s first wife had a qi deviation.” The way Nie Lieyan told it was more like a mission report. “That mortal woman got in the way. Hongyi managed to stop the deviation, but his concubine was already wounded. She gave birth prematurely.” Nie Lieyan shrugged. “That's why Huaisang is so wimpy, I expect. Never had a chance to grow properly.”

A qi deviation? How did Shen Jiu not hear of it before? But of course, she didn’t die of the deviation itself, so she didn’t make it to Shen Jiu’s records. It was a glaring oversight he would have to deal with later.

“That woman was unconscious for days,” Nie Lieyan continued. “Everybody thought she wouldn’t make it.”

There was no pity in his voice. Just facts.

“Having seen the aftermath, Zhuli did what anyone would do in her position. That’s why you shouldn’t bring mortals into your household. Wasn’t her fault she couldn’t defend herself, but everybody suffered for it.”

The man spoke about suicide as if it was a reasonable thing to do.

“And the concubine?” Shen Jiu asked cautiously. He did not ask her name. He was not sure Nie Lieyan would know it.

“Hongyi married her… He had to, to give the boy a proper status. But she was hardly a Madam Nie. Four years later, she drank too much pain-relieving medicine and never woke up again.”

“Why would she do that?” asked Shen Jiu. He had surely contemplated ending his own suffering many times in his life, but it was hard to imagine giving up this way.

“How am I supposed to know?” asked Nie Lieyan defensively. “Just don’t speak to Hongyi about it. It’s no good for anyone when he gets in one of his moods.”

Shen Jiu watched Nie Lieyan stomp away, his mind already busy. He didn’t expect that a qi deviation was involved.

It made sense that Nie Hongyi wouldn’t mention his wife’s deviation in the context of Shen Jiu’s investigation. It was stupid, yes, but understandable nevertheless. However, now Shen Jiu needed more information. It wasn’t about Nie Hongyi anymore.

Something made a young woman have a qi deviation. Understanding what exactly caused it could be the final clue to solve the mystery behind all the early deaths.

He wanted to speak to Gu Nianyuan. The physician could surely tell him more than Nie Lieyan. It was easy to bully Li Tai into letting Shen Jiu speak to his master, who was busy with paperwork.

“I’m too busy for this,” groaned the man upon seeing Shen Jiu. “If you need more records, you’ll have to look for them yourself.”

“Sect Leader Nie told me that you could tell me the details of his wives’ deaths,” said Shen Jiu.

“He told you to ask me what happened?” asked the man incredulously.

“Is it so surprising?”

“I would think that I’m the last person he’d want to speak of this matter. Fine. I might as well tell you the whole sordid tale. This way you know what you’re getting into.”

Gu Nianyuan put down his brush, looking at Shen Jiu expectantly.

“I’ve heard that Nie Hongyi’s first wife…” Shen Jiu started.

“Her name was Nie Zhuli,” the words cracked like a slap.

“Nie Zhuli had a qi deviation. In your professional opinion, what could be a cause for it?”

The times were peaceful, and Nie Zhuli had to be young. Turn it however you like but she was an outlier.

“She was on medical leave for two months. A serious leg injury… I forbade her from night hunting personally. That cursed saber must have been displeased.”

That was interesting. Shen Jiu hadn’t taken forced inactivity into account before.

“Do people often have deviations after being on a medical leave?” asked Shen Jiu.

“It happens. But usually not after two months. We know not to keep the Nie from combat for more than a year, so I didn’t expect there to be any danger. Zhuli had been pregnant before and that took her out for more than ten months.”

Zhuli? The way Gu Nianyuan spoke of her indicated uncommon closeness. Were they friends or was the doctor imposing a familiarity on a woman who could no longer protest it?

“Were there any signs before she deviated?” asked Shen Jiu.

“No,” said Gu Nianyuan with certainty. “She had been irritable, but it could have been because of the injury and her husband’s terrible decisions.”

“What terrible decisions?” asked Shen Jiu suspiciously.

“Zhuli used to say that the Nie were above the vices of the gentry, but her husband proved her wrong,” said Gu Nianyuan. “His wife didn’t want to have another child, so he brought home a concubine. Not even one from a good family. No, he had his eyes on a common dancer, a step better than a whore[6].”

The word hurt for some reason. It didn’t use to hurt before.

“Did you treat both women after the incident?” asked Shen Jiu, trying to stay professional. No matter if he wanted to hit Gu Nianyuan, the answers were more important.

“Once Zhuli came to her senses, she refused treatment. Always so noble. It was hard for her to come to terms with hurting a civilian. I would speak to her, but I was busy treating that woman.” The dislike in the way he said it was palpable. “She almost lost the child and after that, I had to deal with her shattered pelvis and all the lacerations. I was busy for almost two days… then I heard the news. Zhuli threw herself on her own damned saber.”

Gu Nianyuan’s voice wavered, tears in his eyes. Shen Jiu felt no pity. The man who spoke with such care of one woman while in the same breath disparaging another didn’t deserve

sympathy.

“And the other woman?” Shen Jiu asked pointedly. He had spoken of her with three men now, and still no one had said her name aloud, as if she never existed in the first place.

“She woke up a month later,” said Gu Nianyuan dismissively. “Nie Hongyi married her as soon as she could walk, as if his real wife didn’t die that year.”

"The medicine she took." Shen Jiu watched Gu Nianyuan's face carefully. "You prescribed it?"

With the vitriol Shen Jiu had observed, he wouldn’t be surprised if the doctor had given her poison instead.

"Yes, I did. She knew the dosage," Gu Nianyuan said. "I made sure she understood. She took five times the proper amount, in one sitting. There is no accident in that." Then his tone turned amused. “Perhaps her husband lost interest in her with her face disfigured and her feet unsteady. She always wore a veil in the rare times when she left her courtyard, but I was the one to treat her wounds. I know that her famed beauty was no more.”

Shen Jiu did not thank him.

He stood, and the physician did not look at him. Perhaps he was still savoring the concubine's slow death. Shen Jiu didn’t understand why Nie Hongyi sent him to this bitter, petty man, who poisoned every word of his tale with speculation.

He needed air, and he needed to cross-reference the names on his lists with medical records to account for forced inactivity. He worked for the rest of the day and would have worked through the next one, but Meng Yao begged him to entertain the Jiang women.

“Sect Leader Nie is still otherwise occupied,” said Meng Yao quickly. “Shi… Young Master Nie has been stretched thin managing the delegation alone. Your help would be greatly appreciated, Mother.”

“And why is it your responsibility to arrange entertainment?” asked Shen Jiu. “Let the Nie deal with it.”

Meng Yao’s smile widened slightly in defence. “But Mother, didn’t the Jiangs come because of us? It would be terribly rude not to help in this situation.”

Shen Jiu set down his brush. “So it’s not your way of impressing Young Master Nie?”

“It’s my way of mitigating unnecessary tension,” said Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu knew it was a lie, but he didn’t call it. He wanted to speak to Jiang Yanli anyway. She had visited him when he had been confined to Quiet Lotus Pavilion. Called him Shizun despite his public disgrace and asked for guidance. The least he could do was to tolerate her overbearing mother for a few hours.

Yu Ziyuan ran out of pleasantries the moment the tea was poured. “What has happened after we left the feast?” she demanded.

“Nothing,” said Shen Jiu. “Yanli, have you been practicing weiqi in my absence?”

“Yes, Shizun,” said the girl, gaining a disapproving look from her mother. “Father and I play every week.”

“Fengmian got it into his head that he could make a diplomat out of Yanli,” said Yu Ziyuan dismissively. “As if anyone can take her seriously with her weak cultivation and subservient manner.”

“I work to improve myself every day, Mother,” said Jiang Yanli serenely.

"Would you prefer her to become a decoration?" Shen Jiu asked. "Something pretty for her husband to display until he tires of it?"

Yu Ziyuan glared at him, “Of course not! You know more than anyone how hard it is to pave a way for yourself if you are a woman. She thinks that being kind and gentle-handed like her father will serve her well, but Fengmian is a man. Yanli will be eaten alive!” There was a hint of fear in Yu Ziyuan’s eyes.

Jiang Yanli clasped her tea cup so hard the tips of her fingers turned white.

“Then it’s your duty as her mother to teach her how to stand her ground,” Shen Jiu said.

They spoke about the recent negotiation Jiang Yanli participated in, discussing the merits of her approach. Just like her father, Yanli was the kind of person to try to make everyone happy, which her mother saw as a weakness. However, even Yu Ziyuan admitted that the solution was clever.

The tension in the room had eased, almost imperceptibly. Yanli was pouring more tea when Yu Ziyuan spoke again: “Whatever happened between you and Sect Leader Nie, you should make amends.”

“With all due respect, I don’t see how it is any of your business, Madam Yu,” Shen Jiu said.

"He is a good man." Yu Ziyuan’s tone allowed no argument. "Irritating. Foolish when drunk. But a good man nevertheless. Do not… let a misunderstanding fester.”

Shen Jiu didn’t argue with that. He still couldn’t be certain that Nie Hongyi wasn’t responsible for what happened to his wives, but his actions didn’t seem malicious. Shen Jiu knew little about making amends with people, so all he could do was keep pushing forward.

“I’ve brought food,” Meng Yao announced late in the evening, when Shen Jiu was once again buried in research. “The servants say that you haven’t eaten today.”

That boy was too smothering sometimes. As if Shen Jiu could die from skipping lunch. He was a cultivator with a golden core. He didn’t need to eat that often.

“Aren’t you supposed to be spending time with your friends?” Shen Jiu asked. He even permitted Nie Huaisang to skip today’s lessons so the boy could entertain guests.

“It’s too late in the evening for Yanli to be outside her room,” Meng Yao said. “I’ve permitted A-Ying to sleep over in Jiang Cheng’s room, but only if they are quiet.”

Shen Jiu didn’t quite realise that it got this late. He freed space for a food tray on his table. Now that the food was here, it wasn’t like he could waste it.

“Lotus root and pork rib soup?” asked Shen Jiu. It was an unusual choice for supper.

“A-Ying had been feeling homesick, and he wanted A-Yang to try it.”

Homesick. Shen Jiu didn’t realise that his children had a home to miss. His home had always been a single person. Now it was two people, three if you counted the brat. Perhaps getting attached to a place was safer.

Meng Yao waited for him to finish eating before asking, “Did something happen between you and Sect Leader Nie?”

Shen Jiu opened his mouth to say that everything was fine, but then it occurred to him that Meng Yao could actually offer helpful advice on this situation. Thus, Shen Jiu told him most things that happened, starting with the rumors and ending with Gu Nianyuan’s hateful words.

Meng Yao’s reactions were amusing to watch. He clearly disapproved of some of the things Shen Jiu said or did, but the only demonstration of his displeasure was a slight wince. Shen Jiu wondered idly what he would have to do to make his son truly outraged. Perhaps he should have stabbed Nie Lieyan. That would be satisfying.

“I’m not sure whether apologizing will help in this situation,” mused Meng Yao.

“I do not have anything to apologize for,” said Shen Jiu curtly.

Judging by Meng Yao’s disbelieving look, he didn’t agree. “It’s better to wait until the Sect Leader leaves his office. After we see how he behaves, we can think of a strategy.”

“I’m more concerned about the fate of his wives,” Shen Jiu said. “Could you find out more? Nie Lieyan and Gu Nianyuan are awful sources, but I don’t want to ask Nie Mingjue and Nie Huaisang directly.”

It was unclear how much they knew anyway.

“I’ll see what I can do,” Meng Yao said. “I’m not sure why you are so invested though.”

Explaining that would require him to go through the whole investigation of qi deviations, which would probably take hours. He didn’t have the energy for it.

“I’ll tell you later. There is too much to tell, and I’m tired,” said Shen Jiu.

“Sorry if I kept you up,” Meng Yao said immediately. “I shall go now.”

“Wait,” Shen Jiu said. “I wanted to discuss your relationship with Nie Mingjue.”

Meng Yao tensed. “What relationship?“

“I’m neither blind, nor stupid,” said Shen Jiu. Meng Yao couldn’t have warmed up his way into Nie Mingjue’s good graces by keeping his distance.

"Why are you so against it?" Meng Yao's voice was carefully controlled, but there was an edge beneath it now. "He is not as unyielding as he appears. He listens to me. He considers what I say, even when he disagrees."

"You are too young." Shen Jiu's voice was flat. "You don't understand how men like him work."

"Men like him." Meng Yao repeated the words slowly. His face had gone very still. "Is that what this is about? Because he is a man? Do you think it shameful that I want his company? That I want…”

“Yes, it’s because he is a man,” Shen Jiu said, losing his cool. He had spent days being reminded how awful men were. “You might think he is different, that he isn’t inherently twisted the way all the other ones are, but you are wrong. He might seem nice and kind, but sooner or later he will disappoint you. The moment you’re inconvenient he will forget everything that you did for him and discard you!”

“Is that what my father did to you?” Meng Yao asked.

“Yes, he did!” Shen Jiu shouted, not quite understanding who he was talking about. “I gave him all the loyalty I had in me and he couldn’t even spare a day to take me away from the hell he left me in!” He lowered his voice. “You should never trust a man, Meng Yao, or you will get your heart broken.”

Meng Yao stared at him.

His eyes were wide open and his face was pale. Then he whispered, “But Mother, I’m a man too.”

Shen Jiu blinked. He knew that. Meng Yao was a boy now, but soon he would grow up into a man. So like the rest he would… Like the rest he was… Like Yue Qi he would… No.

“You’re different,” Shen Jiu said stubbornly. Meng Yao had to be different.

“How am I different, Mother?” asked Meng Yao. “Do you think I’m… inherently twisted?”

“No. Never,” Shen Jiu shook his head. Too much had happened lately. He was so tired of it. “Don’t listen to me. If you want to try…”

"I don't approve," he said. The words were quieter now, the sharpness worn away. "Of you and Nie Mingjue. I don't think it will end well.”

Meng Yao said nothing, waiting.

"But you aren't going to listen to me." It was not a question. “You think you know better. So just… come to me. If it goes wrong. If he hurts you. If you need… I won't say I told you so. I won't gloat. I'll just…”

The word came out choked. Meng Yao put his hand on top of his and squeezed gently. “I will,” he said softly. “Don’t worry about me, Mother. And thank you… for telling me.”

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[1] In Ancient China boys officially became men at the age of 20, while girls became women at 15. In MDZS universe, however, the age of maturity for both is 15. So at 15 boys usually receive their courtesy names.

As for the drinking age, there wasn’t an official drinking age in Ancient China. In fact, children often drank weak wine. However, the excessive drinking in youth was considered morally questionable. Nie Mingjue is being remarkably strict by prohibiting even a sip. return to text ↩

[2] The suffix -er is a diminutive showing affection or familiarity, typically used by elders toward children or juniors. For a father to use it publicly for his seventeen-year old son is a tad ridiculous. return to text ↩

[3] The prefix A- is an intimate form of address used between family members, close friends, or lovers. For Nie Hongyi to use to address his son’s teacher is extremely questionable and immediate gossip fuel. return to text ↩

[4] Unrestrained ease (随逸, my translation is likely imperfect because I have only a surface level understanding of Chinese, so I usually go with what feels the most poetic/symbolic)

The naming of the sword was way more convoluted than in canon. Basically, Wei Ying told Shen Jiu to name it whatever (Suibian), Shen Jiu wrote to Jiang Fengmian saying do what you want (Suiyi, 随意, a more formal less colloquial version of Suibian, 随便), so Jiang Fengmian though he could do a pun out of it and used a homophone.

Don’t ask me why I do world-play in a language I do not speak. I have no idea. return to text ↩

[5] Literally "senior martial brother." That’s how male first disciples are addressed. Using this address publicly Meng Yao shows his allegiance to the Nie sect. return to text ↩

[6] Gu Nianyuan's casual contempt reflects historical attitudes toward female entertainers. The categories of "actress," "dancer," "courtesan," and "prostitute" blurred in practice, and women in performance professions faced permanent stigma regardless of their actual conduct. return to text ↩

It occurred to me this chapter that the number of original or semi original characters is so large that it can be hard to keep track. So here is the list:

Niè Hóngyì (聂弘毅) — Hóng (great, vast), Yì (resolute, steadfast)
Sect Leader of Qinghe Nie. Jovial, dramatic, rumored to have murdered his wives (untrue?), drinks too much.

Niè Lièyán (聂烈岩) — Liè (ardent, fierce), Yán (rock, cliff)
Nie Hongyi's cousin and second-in-command. Blunt, suspicious of outsiders, loyal to Hongyi. Has a thick mustache.

Gu Niànyuǎn (顾念远) — Niàn (to think of), Yuǎn (distant)
Sect physician. Bitter, resentful, despises the Nie cultivation method. His relationship with Nie Hongyi is strained.

Lǐ Tài (李泰) — Lǐ (plum), Tài (peaceful, safe)
Gu Nianyuan's personal disciple. Young, nervous, easily bullied by Shen Jiu.

Niè Zhūlì (聂铸丽) — Zhù (to cast/mold metal), Lì (beautiful)
Nie Hongyi's first wife. Nie Mingjue's mother.

Niè Zhēnrén (聂真人) — Zhēn (true, genuine), Rén (person)
Sect blacksmith. Nie Zhuli's father. Old, scarred, blunt. Forged sabers for sixty years. Helped repair Hongyi's saber.

Chapter 33: What they don't know…

When Yue Yao wasn't smiling, he looked startlingly similar to his mother. It was so rare to see him without a smile that every such instance took Jiang Cheng by surprise.

"Do you two promise to go to sleep in a reasonable time?" asked Yue Yao sternly. His face was stony, but the playful shine in his eyes betrayed that he wasn't serious. It was hard to take him seriously, especially after he had slipped them a half-full jar of wine just a few minutes ago.

Jiang Cheng still nodded out of respect for his elder.

Meanwhile, Wei Ying didn't have an ounce of respect for anyone. "We will just sleep in," he said waving a dismissive hand.

Yue Yao reached out and flicked Wei Ying on the forehead gently, "A-Ying, there's a training exchange planned tomorrow. You can skip it, but Jiang Cheng is required to go."

A few months in the Impure Realm and Yue Yao was already involved in managing guests. Jiang Cheng knew Yue Yao well enough not to question it. If their family hadn't left Lotus Pier, Yue Yao would become head disciple sooner or later. Jiang Cheng was sure of that.

"Only for you, Yao-ge," said Wei Ying with a dramatic sigh as if he hadn't babbled about the exchange all evening, eager to use the Jiang style against the Nie disciples.

"I trust you to be reasonable, Jiang Cheng," said Yue Yao. His smile was soft and private as if they were sharing a secret. Jiang Cheng felt the tips of his ears burn at the attention.

"I'll beat him into shape if I need to." His words came out harsher than he meant them, but it was too late to take them back. That was the thing Jiang Cheng didn't enjoy about talking to Yue Yao. He was always so smooth, so effortlessly charming that comparing himself to Yue Yao Jiang Cheng felt like a chicken standing next to a crane.

"Don't you trust me, Yao-ge?" asked Wei Ying pouting exaggeratedly. Jiang Cheng never understood how his friend could stand to be so shameless. Had he no dignity?

"With my life, A-Ying," said Yue Yao earnestly. Then his eyes sharpened. "Not with the public peace though. I know what happened to that summer pavilion."

Wei Ying paled. "Did A-Yang tell you?"

Yue Yao shook his head, still smiling dangerously. Seeing this smile, Wei Ying didn't dare complain. Jiang Cheng shuddered, remembering what happened last time Wei Ying managed to anger his brother. Yue Yao could be terrifying if he wanted to be.

Wei Ying appeared well chastised and thoroughly remorseful until the very moment his brother left. Then a mischievous grin crossed his face. "I've invited Nie Huaisang, so we'll

have a real party! He said he will bring something special."

Something fell down in the pit of Jiang Cheng's stomach. Perhaps it was his expectations of an evening when he would be able to spend time with his best friend with no interlopers. Just the two of them, like before. But Wei Ying couldn't go a single night without his new best friend, could he?

Jiang Cheng crossed his arms. "You know it's only polite to ask before inviting other people to my room."

Wei Ying clapped him on the shoulder, unrepentant. "Oh, come on, I thought you liked Nie Huaisang!"

Jiang Cheng didn't know where Wei Ying got this idea from. Jiang Cheng didn't know Nie Huaisang and he mildly disliked him for being Wei Ying's friend in his stead. He realized that this was admittedly an idiotic reason to dislike someone so he tolerated Nie Huaisang publicly but that was the height of his magnanimity.

An elaborate knock on the door interrupted his sullen thoughts. Jiang Cheng remembered it from their days at Lotus Pier. They thought it up together while joking around. The knowledge that it had been shared with someone else stung.

"I taught him that," announced Wei Ying, before letting Nie Huaisang inside. Nie Huaisang slipped inside hastily, looking behind as if he was expecting to be followed. He had something wrapped in silk in his hands, and Jiang Cheng wondered what it was.

"Come on in, come on in," urged Wei Ying whispering dramatically. Jiang Cheng suspected that the two simply wanted to play at a clandestine meeting. He didn't know why he had to be involved in this spectacle, couldn't they do it without him?

The first thing Nie Huaisang did was to walk over to the table and take the lead off the jar, looking inside with a tilted head. "You really got it," he marvelled.

"I told you I would talk my brother into it," said Wei Ying proudly.

"I don't understand what the big deal is," huffed Jiang Cheng. "It's like you've never had wine before."

Two pairs of eyes snapped to him. "Have you?" asked Wei Ying.

"Of course. Father lets me take sips whenever I ask. Which I don't anymore because alcohol tastes gross," said Jiang Cheng. The only time he tried was years ago, and he immediately spat it out and tried to wash the sour taste away with water. Father thought it was all very funny, until Mother saw.

"Da-ge would kill me if I even looked at wine in front of him," complained Nie Huaisang.

"Shizun is the same way," said Wei Ying. "Which isn't fair at all! Yao-ge said that she used to give him wine when he was little, to help him sleep."

Jiang Cheng tried to imagine the stern Master Shen giving wine to a child. The image was too strange. Then Jiang Cheng remembered. They hadn't spoken much about it after the trial but everybody who had been present knew where Yue Yao grew up. Perhaps in that scandalous place it truly wasn't a big deal.

"Should I pour?" Nie Huaisang already reached for the jar, then paused. "Or is Jiang-xiong considered the host?"

Nie Huaisang was acting really familiar. They didn't know each other for long. At least Mother would be pleased. She did want Jiang Cheng to make connections in other sects… Was Jiang Cheng supposed to call Nie Huaisang by his given name then?

"Who cares." Jiang Cheng grabbed the jar. "It's not exactly a polite situation."

He poured, his hand steady. He was happy he didn't spill it. That would be embarrassing.

The wine tasted not as bad as Jiang Cheng remembered. It was less sour and didn't burn the mouth as much. He still didn't like it but now it was more like the herbal wine his grand-aunt forced Jiang Cheng to drink once when he had a fever.

Nie Huaisang looked down at his cup with disappointment. "I've been expecting something more of it."

"I think it's delicious." Wei Ying's grin didn't convince anybody.

Half an hour later, the jar was empty.

"Aren't we supposed to be feeling something?" Nie Huaisang asked.

Wei Ying shook his head experimentally. "My head is kind of spinning?"

Jiang Cheng rolled his eyes. "Yue Yao watered it down."

He didn't understand why it tasted weaker at first but now it made sense. It also explained why Yue Yao had given in so easily and why he was so amused when he handed over the jar. It was just like Yue Yao to ostensibly give in and then arrange it so everything still went his way.

"I didn't expect my own brother to betray me like this," gasped Wei Ying. Behind the drama there was a genuine offence. He was used to his brother humoring him and hardly ever noticed when he was being managed.

"Let me offer another entertainment then." Nie Huaisang brightened, reaching for the object he had brought. He unwrapped it with reverence but all that was revealed was a thin book.

Once Nie Huaisang opened it, it took Jiang Cheng a moment to understand what he was looking at. The indecency… the exaggerated poses… and were they two men!? Jiang Cheng's whole face burned.

"Why would you bring this!?" His voice squeaked embarrassingly.

“Are those… two men?” asked Wei Ying, moving to have a better look at the pornography. “Yao-ge never explained how it is supposed to go with cut sleeves[1]...”

Jiang Cheng wanted to be anywhere but here.

“I didn’t know either, until I found this gem,” said Nie Huaisang. “It’s now the rarest item in my collection.”

“You have a collection of those?!” asked Jiang Cheng incredulously. He was being too loud, he knew it, but how else was he supposed to react to something like that?

“Around twenty,” said Nie Huaisang with a shrug. “I can show you the other ones sometime, If you want.”

Jiang Cheng did not want to see the other ones.

He didn’t know where to look. It was probably polite to at least glance at the book and he didn’t want the others to think that he was a baby who couldn’t handle such things, but… Seeing the attention with which Wei Ying studied the pages, Jiang Cheng didn’t want to see anything. If he did, how would he look Wei Ying in the eyes after?

“Are the other ones with women at least?” asked Jiang Cheng thoughtlessly, just to say something.

Nie Huaisang’s eyes lit up with amusement. “They are more traditional, yes. Are you a connoisseur of female beauty, Jiang-xiong?”

Jiang Cheng made a high pitched sound he didn’t realize his throat could make.

“Do you need help courting a girl, Jiang Cheng?” asked Wei Ying with a laugh. At least that made him stop looking at the damned book. “What about Jiang Liao? She is only your distant cousin.”

Jiang Cheng would rather marry a goat than her. Jiang Liao had made Jiang Yanli cry once.

“She’s too busy mooning at your brother. She was inconsolable for a month after you left,” said Jiang Cheng instead.

Wei Ying blinked at him. “Really? I didn’t notice.”

Jiang Cheng didn’t know how it was possible to miss that. Her flirting was awful.

Nie Huaisang immediately became interested in the conversation. “Did Yue Yao have a girl he liked in Lotus Pier?”

“He didn’t give her the time of day,” Jiang Cheng said.

Wei Ying shrugged. “He is too good for her anyway.”

Jiang Cheng felt personally offended. “So Jiang Liao is not good enough for your brother, but for me she is fine.”

Wei Ying laughed like an idiot and didn’t even defend himself.

"I wonder who is good enough for Yue Yao." Nie Huaisang's voice was thoughtful, almost speculative.

Wei Ying answered without hesitation. "Jiang Yanli."

Jiang Cheng tensed. "She's engaged," he said quickly. "Don't say things like that. You'll start rumors."

Nie Huaisang hummed. “And if you had to pick a man, who would make the cut? Are Jiang-xiong and I good enough?”

What on Earth was he talking about and why did he involve Jiang Cheng in this. The worst thing was that now Jiang Cheng was invested in the answer.

“Jiang Cheng will do,” said Wei Ying thoughtfully. “But you Huaisang are too lazy. You’ll just make Yao-ge do anything for you.”

Jiang Cheng didn’t know why that felt like a win, but for some reason it did.

Waking up to his brother’s shouting was nothing new to Huaisang. He had slept through enough lessons and training sessions “accidentally” for it to be a normal occurrence. That’s why he mumbled, “Please, give me a moment, Da-ge,” before realizing that he wasn’t in his own bed.

“Huaisang!” Da-ge grabbed him by the shoulder, shaking the sleep from him as he forced him to sit up. “You’ll get up this instant and explain yourself.”

Huaisang blinked blearily. Last night they had all ended up sprawled together on Jiang Cheng’s bed, trading stories late into the night. Now his friends scrambled at the far end of the bedding, eyes wide, staring at Da-ge like he was some kind of yaoguai that had come to eat them.

Perhaps for them Da-ge did seem intimidating. That was difficult to imagine.

“I don’t know, Da-ge,” pleaded Huaisang. “We were just talking, and then… we must have fallen asleep.” He squinted at the window trying to determine the time. It didn’t seem like they had overslept to him.

“You don’t know!” roared Da-ge, making Jiang Cheng flinch. “I spent the whole morning looking for you, and now I find out that you’ve been drinking! Where did you get the wine, Huaisang?”

“I stole it from the kitchens,” said Wei Ying loudly before Huaisang could think of a lie. “So it’s my fault.”

“A-Ying,” chided Yue Yao the picture of disappointment. Huaisang hadn’t even noticed him there, distracted by Da-ge. “I’ll make sure to reprimand my brother for his wrongdoings. I’m sure that he was the instigator.” Yue Yao’s speech was so smooth that it was hard to believe that he was the one who gave Wei Ying that wine. Huaisang was impressed.

“Huaisang still should have known better.” Da-ge’s voice was already losing its heat, his anger fading. He was always like that. Huaisang had learned to wait out the storm before trying to reason with him.

“What is this!?” Da-ge was shouting again. He bent to snatch something off the floor. Huaisang’s book must have fallen from the bed during the night.

For the first time that morning, Huaisang felt genuinely worried. Usually, even if Da-ge punished him, all he had to do to get out of it was complain to Father. But now… with a cut-sleeve book involved, Huaisang couldn’t be sure that his father would be lenient.

Da-ge’s face reddened as he registered what he was holding. He opened his mouth to speak but no words came out. Yue Yao came closer, his sleeve brushing Da-ge’s side as he leaned over to see the book, his face mildly curious. He gasped in outrage, but Huaisang could see the laughter in his eyes.

“You… “ sputtered Da-ge. “Have you no shame!?”

Yue Yao put a calming hand on Da-ge’s forearm. “This truly is serious, Shixiong. I’m sure you have more important business to get to, so why don’t I have a serious conversation with them. My own brother was involved, so it’s only right that I do my share of disciplining.”

Da-ge looked at Yue Yao’s earnest face and let out a long breath. “You’re right. I don’t have time for this. Make sure that you impress on them that they are too young for such… literature.”

If Huaisang hadn’t already approved of Yue Yao as a future brother-in-law, he certainly did now. This was incredible.

“Of course, Shixiong,” chirped Yue Yao.

Da-ge nodded at him approvingly. Then he tucked Huaisang’s book into his sleeve. “I’ll dispose of this.”

Huaisang pouted. He should have brought something less valuable. That one book with ugly illustrations, where women looked like fishes… he could do without that one.

His brother paused at the door to give Huaisang one last disapproving look and left.

Yue Yao waited until Da-ge was far enough away not to hear them before smiling at them conspiratorially. “That could have gone worse. Now, A-Ying, please make sure you are presentable for the training exchange. The outfit I chose for you is on your dressing screen. Please tie your hair well.”

No wonder Yue Yao and Da-ge got along. Huaisang remembered the time when Da-ge became overly concerned with what he was eating, thinking that Huaisang would grow better if he ate more meat. Luckily Da-ge didn't care enough about clothes to manage what Huaisang was wearing.

"Aren't you going to reprimand us?" Jiang Cheng frowned. He was so straight-laced. It was rather endearing. Perhaps that was why Da-ge liked the Lan disciple he had been exchanging letters with for the past year.

"You couldn't have known Shixiong would want to have breakfast with Huaisang today," Yue Yao explained patiently. "Just be careful to hide anything incriminating before you go to sleep next time. Servants can be nosy."

Huaisang wasn't worried about the servants. They had adored him since he was little. They had even helped him hide from Da-ge when he was skipping training. Huaisang was sure they would stay quiet.

"Huaisang, let me walk you to your room," said Yue Yao, changing the topic. He seemed to be in a hurry. "We should agree on what to tell your brother if he asks."

It made sense, Huaisang supposed. Jiang Cheng's rooms were near his in any case, so he didn't bother tidying his hair before following Yue Yao into the hallway.

They passed only one person on the way, but Auntie Lu was too busy with a small mountain of dirty laundry to care about Huaisang's hair. She was also rather old. Her eyes were probably bad.

Once they were inside Huaisang's rooms with the door closed, Yue Yao changed his tune again. "I'm sure you'll think of something to tell your brother without my involvement," he said. "Just tell him that you won't even look at pornography before you're engaged."

"Was there something else you wanted to speak about, Yao-ge?" Huaisang tilted his head, making his voice sweet and curious.

It seemed quite simple to him: if Yue Yao wanted to be Da-ge's lover, he had to treat Huaisang as his precious little brother. Though Huaisang would rather do without having his clothes laid out for him. That would be embarrassing. In fact, he was quite embarrassed on Wei Ying's behalf.

Yue Yao didn't blink at the new form of address, as if Huaisang had always been calling him that. "Remember the conversation we had about our parents? I think you're right."

The acknowledgement came so suddenly that Huaisang was unprepared. He had already given up on figuring out what was going on between Master Shen and his father. With Xue Yang refusing to spy for him, Huaisang had to rely on servants, who didn't find any evidence for his theory. They didn't seem to be lovers, but anything else was hard to determine, especially with Master Shen being herself.

For some time, Huaisang thought that she was like those book characters who would be mean and prickly but had a secret sweet side. Master Shen didn't appear to have a sweeter side. In fact, she was quite mean to Father. Could it be that his father was the kind of man who enjoyed mean people?

"Have you seen something?" asked Huaisang, leaning forward.

Yue Yao shook his head. "I only know they had a… falling out recently. Something about your late mothers. However, I don't understand what could have alerted my mother. There can't be anything concerning, can there?"

Huaisang blinked. He hadn't thought of his mother in weeks. He wondered whether she had trained the same way when he started his dancing lessons. 'Am I interested in fan dancing because my mother was a dancer, or am I interested because I am a dancer's son,' he had thought. It struck him as profound, so he asked Master Shen. 'What does your mother have to do with it?' Oddly enough, she honestly couldn't understand.

"I'm not sure," said Huaisang. Father never talked about either of his wives.

"If it's not serious, they could still make peace," said Yue Yao. "But if there is really something to be concerned about, I could fuel my mother's fears slightly. Tell her some rumors."

It was unlike Yue Yao to suggest manipulating his own mother this way. That was just too cold.

Huaisang understood that a silken net was being wrapped around him, but he wasn't sure what Yue Yao was fishing for. He wasn't the type to enjoy rumors for their own sake, so it couldn't be the reason.

Was he genuinely concerned for his mother?

"I don't think I can help with that…" said Huaisang, using his genuine confusion as a tool. "I was too young when they died. I don't really remember."

"Really? That's a pity," said Yue Yao, shaking his head sadly. "I'm sorry if by bringing this up I stirred up any painful memories."

Huaisang wasn't sure what exactly Yue Yao wanted but… He did help Huaisang escape Da-ge's wrath earlier, so he decided to be generous.

"You can ask Auntie Lu," said Huaisang, keeping his voice light. "We went past her on our way here… she does laundry now, but nine years ago she was my late mother's personal maid."

She was also Huaisang's nanny for a while. Da-ge demoted her after Huaisang had fallen seriously ill one winter, but she didn't appear to bear any grudge.

"That will be helpful," said Yue Yao, smiling at him warmly. Huaisang couldn't tell whether it was genuine or not, which added some fun to it. "Thank you. Now I have to help your

brother with preparations. I'll tell him that Wei Ying found this book in an inn during our journeys."

"Yao-ge is my saviour," said Huaisang brightly. "For a moment there, I thought Da-ge would demand to inspect all my books."

That would be disastrous.

"Don't thank me," said Yue Yao modestly. "I should have found a way to warn you before we came. I didn't expect Shixiong to come to Jiang Cheng's rooms. It's a bit impolite to invade a guest's space."

After Yue Yao left, Huaisang replayed their conversation. The recollection went smoothly at first until he stumbled upon the mention of his mother. Huaisang frowned. But what could Master Shen have heard that would make her wary of his father? She didn't seem like a woman easily scared, so what could have spooked her?

Huaisang knew little of either of his father's wives.

Da-ge never spoke of the woman who bore him, so Huaisang had always assumed that his brother didn't remember her. After all, Huaisang didn't remember his own mother.

For as long as he could remember, Da-ge had been the only constant. He all but filled the space where a mother should have been, so Huaisang hardly ever noticed the place was ever empty.

That didn't mean that he was never curious about his mother. He just… thought of her in a more abstract way. Huaisang wasn't like all the other Nie, so whatever made him different had to come from his mother, right? That's why he loved it when Da-ge spoke of her, soaking up every detail. That's how he knew that her favourite fan set was pale green and painted with bamboo and that she preferred red tea to all other sorts.

What Da-ge never told him was how she died. He had said that she was often ill, that she couldn't dance anymore because of her poor health, so Huaisang assumed she died because of it.

Perhaps he was wrong.

He wondered whether Da-ge would tell him if he asked directly. He wasn't a child anymore, so there wasn't any reason to hide it.

Whatever Da-ge told him, he decided, he would share with Yue Yao. It was important to maintain good relations with someone who'd shown such willingness to deflect Da-ge's fury.

The thought snagged on something. Pulled at a thread he hadn't noticed before.

Wasn't it strange that Da-ge had wanted to have breakfast with Huaisang? They hadn't shared a morning meal since Da-ge's duties grew. Now he always had to eat before Huaisang even woke. It was strange for things to change so suddenly.

And… Yue Yao had been with Da-ge during the search. He could have stopped Da-ge from entering quite easily. All he had to do was say that Jiang Cheng didn't like strangers in his room. He hadn't.

So either Yue Yao was too slow to think of an obvious solution, which Huaisang couldn't imagine happening, or he had wanted Da-ge in that room.

He had been the one to give them wine. He had likely known that Huaisang would come. Wei Ying would have told him.

But why do all this?

It didn't make sense to cause a scene just to resolve it. Unless… unless that was the whole point. It had endeared Yue Yao to both Jiang Cheng and Huaisang. It had also proven his competence to Da-ge once again. And… if he wanted something from Huaisang, be it information or a favor, making sure Huaisang owed him was the surest way to get it.

That was beautifully done. Huaisang was impressed. When it came to intrigues, Yue Yao was clearly the one to watch out for and the one to learn from.

He had, however, cost Huaisang a gem from his collection. Huaisang would collect this debt someday.

The last echo of winter chill had returned overnight, covering the puddles with a thin film of ice that Xiao-Yang[2] was gleefully crushing under his feet. His little face lit up after a particularly loud crack. He reminded Yanli of her younger brother when he was small, though A-Cheng had never been quite this thin.

"I hope your family was pleased with the exchange," Yue Yao said quietly.

It was the first time they had managed a private conversation since the Jiangs' arrival, if this could be called private. Their genders made any unsupervised meeting scandalous, so even with Xiao-Yang as a technical chaperone, they kept a careful distance, alert for passing servants.

Yanli could feel that distance soak into their words together with the chill air. Politeness filled the gaps where intimacy used to reside.

"We were all greatly impressed by Young Master Nie's prowess… as well as his managerial skills. Mother encouraged A-Cheng to use him as an example."

"Encouraged" was too soft a word for what her mother had actually said, but Yue Yao, as always, understood.

"Mothers' expectations can be harsh," he said softly. "But they come from a place of love."

"That's true." Yanli knew her mother loved them. Still, she wished to hear something other than criticism from her. At least for A-Cheng's sake. Yanli could bear it, but she hated it

when Mother compared A-Cheng to others. “Still, I worry for my brother. He is a sensitive boy.”

“Does he still train with your father?” asked Yue Yao.

Yanli sighed. “Yes. Father has been getting better with giving praise. But when Mother is too harsh, he rarely corrects her. I suspect he doesn’t want things to sour between them now that they’re getting along better.”

“They do?” asked Yue Yao. “That is good news.”

“We’ve started eating together again and there are fewer misunderstandings than before. We even went to the market together as a family,” Yanli smiled at the memory. “Things are better. I just… I suppose I expected that if my parents resolved their differences, everything would be fixed.”

“Those things take time,” said Yue Yao, giving her a sympathetic smile. “But as elders, we can influence our parents in small ways. It’s difficult and can lead to friction, but I’ve found it was worth it.”

“Has your mother finally told you the secret she’s been keeping?” asked Yanli. There was only one secret important enough to be worth mentioning: the identity of Yue Yao’s father. They’d discussed it often enough among themselves.

“No, but she said some things that… changed my view of him,” Yue Yao said. “I still want the truth but now I’m less sure about what I want to do with it.”

Yanli nodded. Whoever Yue Yao’s father was, he was either dead or a bad man. Otherwise he would have returned for his son at least. For Shizun’s sake Yanli hoped that the man was dead.

They watched Xiao-Yang put his hand into the slush, taking something out of it.

“A-Yang, be careful!” chided Yue Yao, his smile tensing slightly.

“I found a horseshoe,” said the boy, showing them his find. His little hand was now dirty and his sleeve wet.

“It’s very nice, Xiao-Yang,” Yanli said.

The boy looked at her, his eyes narrowing. “You’re strange. You can have it.”

He thrust the dirty horseshoe at her. Yue Yao moved to intervene, but Yanli waved him off.

“Thank you, Xiao-Yang,” she said, taking the dirty present carefully so it wouldn’t drip on her robes.

“Let me give you a handkerchief at least,” said Yue Yao, anxious. “You didn’t have to take it. A-Yang wouldn’t be offended.”

“It’s not every day cute little brothers give me gifts,” joked Yanli. “Not all of us are as lucky as A-Yao, getting a new little brother so suddenly. I’m jealous.”

“I assure you there’s little to be jealous of. A-Yang is dear to me, of course, but he can be quite troublesome. Especially when he is skipping his lessons,” he said the last part louder so Xiao Yang would hear it. The little boy stuck out his tongue at Yue Yao.

Yanli laughed. “I disagree. From what I’ve seen there’s a lot to be jealous of. Xiao-Yang is so cute and so is Young Master Nie.”

Yue Yao’s face flushed so quickly it was almost comical. Yanli had never seen him lose composure like this.

“A-Li,” he said pitifully. Yue Yao was also rather cute.

Whatever wall of propriety stood between them dissolved. It was dangerous to relax like that even when there wasn’t anyone around, but it was worth it.

“You praised him so highly both in your letter and in person, but you never mentioned his good looks,” Yanli said.

Yue Yao made a choking sound. “Now you’re bullying me,” he said.

“I’m just jealous. You know I don’t have opportunities for romance like that.”

She hadn’t seen Jin Yu for three years, but she doubted she would cut half as dashing a figure as Young Master Nie. At least he bothered to write something, though sometimes Yanli was confused by the topics he chose. She did not understand why he felt the need to explain to her in great detail what a measuring snake was considering that she was a cultivator and received the same education he did.

“You could. You’d just have to be careful to break the engagement before any rumors start,” said Yue Yao, rubbing at his red cheeks.

Yanli braced herself. “I’m planning to go through with this engagement.”

Yue Yao gave her a surprised look. “You are?” Last time they’d discussed it, Yanli still wasn’t sure, so it made sense for him to be surprised.

“From Jin Yu’s letters, I can tell that we could get along. I think that’s good enough. I need this marriage.”

“You have other prospects,” Yue Yao said. He didn’t mention that Nie Mingjue was among those prospects, but they both thought it.

“Not as good as the Jin,” Yanli said, her voice confident. “The Lan are an option, but they are too detached from worldly affairs. If I want to make changes, I need the Jin sect’s influence.”

She’d never said this aloud before, not even to Yue Yao. She hadn’t been sure she could do it. Every time she thought of it, she could hear her mother’s scoff, “With your weak character?

Forget it."

"What changes do you want to make?" asked Yue Yao. "Your sect hardly needs any help to prosper."

"I have been lucky to be born in a cultivation sect," Yanli said. It took her some time to realize it, but it was the truth. "My cultivation might be weak, but I'm protected in ways many other people aren't."

She always felt bad for the underprivileged, in the detached way that came from not having to observe their struggles in person. Then she found out that the teacher she had been looking up to was a former prostitute, sold as a child and forced to take drastic measures to save her son from the same fate.

If the truth was widely known both Yanli's Shizun and her best friend would be reviled for something that wasn't their fault.

"After you left, I kept visiting Auntie Sisi," Yanli confessed. It had been improper for Yue Yao to visit alone, so Yanli and Wei Ying used to go with him. "She introduced me to some women in town. So many of them are in awful situations, and all they need is a little help. I talked to my father… he could change their lives with one word."

Yanli swallowed, clutching the cold horseshoe in her hand. The edge of it pressed into her palm, grounding her. "As a Sect Leader's wife, I'll also have this power… and the funds. I want to help as much as I can."

"If anybody can do it, it's you." Yue Yao held her gaze. He sounded so certain. Something loosened in Yanli's chest. If Yue Yao believed in her, then perhaps she truly could achieve what she wanted.

If Huaisang was reading yellow books[3], did that mean that Nie Mingjue didn't have to explain how those things worked? Or did it mean he should have explained long ago and had failed Huaisang by avoiding the topic? The book was about cut sleeves… was that something they needed to discuss?

He was supposed to check the provision orders for the next month, but Nie Mingjue struggled to focus on numbers. He felt relieved when he heard a knock on the door, thinking that this was some small emergency that he could fix.

Nie Mingjue didn't expect to see Huaisang. After what happened in the morning, he'd assumed his brother would avoid him for at least a day.

"Did you come to apologize?" asked Nie Mingjue.

Huaisang shifted from one foot to another. "It was a misunderstanding…" he said pitifully. "Wei Ying found… that book in an inn during their travels. He brought it to show us because he thought it was funny."

Nie Mingjue felt relieved. His brother was still a child.

“As his friend, you bear moral responsibility for Wei Ying’s conduct. Don’t let him lead you astray. Correct him if you can, and if you cannot, then leave. Otherwise, you’re complicit.”

Nie Mingjue had cousins and uncles like Wei Ying. They poured him wine, invited him to gamble, a few times they even tried to drag him to brothels with them. It wasn’t surprising that Huaisang couldn’t refuse, especially considering that he didn’t have any friends before.

Now his brother looked remorseful, but Nie Mingjue had no guarantee that Huaisang wouldn’t follow his friend into another misadventure soon. “Perhaps I should speak to Wei Ying,” said Nie Mingjue thoughtfully. Wei Ying seemed like a reasonable young man to him. He confessed his misconduct immediately instead of lying to protect himself… that was a sign of good character.

“No!” squeaked Huaisang. “I mean, Yue Yao had already spoken to him about it. I’m sure he had reprimanded him already.”

Nie Mingjue nodded. He trusted Yue Yao to handle his own brother’s punishment.

Huaisang didn’t say anything but he looked like he wanted to. He even opened his mouth to start speaking, then closed it. That was annoying.

“If you wish to speak, speak,” said Nie Mingjue.

“Da-ge,” began Huaisang. “How did my mother die?”

The question hit him like a bolt of lightning. Nie Mingjue had been waiting for it, and still he wasn’t prepared for it.

One late evening in Gusu he had discussed the tragedy that had happened to his mothers with Lan Xichen, who could understand him as no one else in the world. Xichen agreed that knowing the full truth would only bring Huaisang unneeded pain.

“Why do you ask now?” he asked to give himself more time.

Huaisang squirmed. “Yesterday my friends and I were talking about our families. Wei Ying’s parents died on a night hunt, you know, so he asked whether the same happened to my mother. That just… got me thinking.”

“Mother… your late mother wasn’t a cultivator. You know that,” said Mingjue as gently as he was capable of. He did his best to fill the gap left by her absence with stories, but he knew it wasn’t the same. It never felt fair that Huaisang didn’t remember his mother while Mingjue had so many wonderful memories with her.

“But why did she die so young then?” asked Huaisang. “Was it because of her poor health?”

Mingjue sighed. Huaisang was old enough to know this part. “You remember how your late mother was badly injured and couldn’t dance anymore?”

Mingjue had told Huaisang about this when he had given him her old fans. He hadn't mentioned that Mother couldn't even look at them without tearing up.

Huaisang nodded.

"It was hard for her to walk, so she mostly stayed in her courtyard. I kept her company as much as I could and, of course, you were there with her, but still she grew… melancholic."

She hid it well. Mingjue, back then, certainly hadn't noticed anything amiss.

He remembered the day she died. Servants crowded around Mother's courtyard, blocking the entrance. They wouldn't let him in and ignored his questions, looking anxious. Then Auntie Lu wrapped him in a hug and said that Mother was gone. Mingjue hadn't believed her. He remembered tearing free and pushing through the crowd to find Father.

'Where is she? Please tell me where she is,' he had begged incoherently.

Mingjue opened his mouth, echoing his father's answer: "Your mother killed herself."

Huaisang didn't cry or scream or fall to the ground like Mingjue had done back then. He just stared at Mingjue for a moment, then said, "Oh, I'm sorry, Da-ge."

Mingjue crossed his arms, taken aback. "You are sorry? I should be the one sorry. She was your mother."

"I don't remember her enough to be hurt by her death," said Huaisang plainly. "You do."

He made it sound so simple. And it was simple. After all, Mingjue hardly remembered his birth mother either. His only memory of her was her bloodstained face as she clashed blades with Father trying to get through him to kill Mingjue. Her death didn't hurt Mingjue as much as her actions did.

"You are growing wise," Mingjue said. "Your lessons with Master Shen must be paying off."

"Don't tell Father, but Master Shen has been teaching me how to dance with fans," Huaisang said quickly. "I can show you what I've learned sometime."

Huaisang seemed happy when he said that. Mingjue hated to ruin this, but he had to make sure that Huaisang was being safe. "You know that you cannot show anyone else, right?"

"Of course, I know," said Huaisang. "But you'll come to see, right? If you have to know, it's much harder than it looks! My muscles didn't hurt as much even after your training…"

Huaisang kept telling Mingjue about his dance lessons for a while after that. He complained a lot but it was clear that he was passionate about the craft. Mingjue couldn't help smiling at his brother's excitement.

Only in the evening could Meng Yao steal a moment to speak to Auntie Lu as planned. He found her struggling with a heavy basket of dry linens. A perfect opening.

“Let me help you, Madam Lu,” he said, smiling in the way that older ladies adored.

Auntie Lu didn’t disappoint, softening immediately. “What a well-raised young man you are, Yao-er! But how many times do I have to tell you to call me Auntie? I’m hardly a Madam.”

She was still pleased to be called Madam and Meng Yao could see that. That’s why he did it every time.

“Of course, Auntie Lu,” he said, taking the heavy basket from her.

He had begun cultivating this relationship well before he learned that she used to be Second Madam Nie’s personal maid. It always paid to help servants when he could and Auntie Lu was one of the servants assigned to his mother’s rooms, so he was especially attentive towards her.

He brought the basket to the laundry room, where he helped Auntie Lu fold it.

“It’s not a job for a young master like you,” said the woman, worried.

“After my father had died, our lives were very humble. I’m used to doing chores,” said Meng Yao. Partially it was true.

“Your poor mother,” said Auntie Lu sincerely. “She did well for herself all things considered.”

“I worry for her.” He lowered his voice. “Can I tell you something in confidence?”

“Of course, Yao-er.”

His next words were dangerous but he decided the risk was worth it. “I’ve heard some rumors recently… about my mother and Sect Leader Nie. I’ve seen nothing of the sort myself, but they are both widowed so it does make sense. I just… worry for my mother’s happiness.”

He blinked quickly, making his eyes glisten, which tended to inspire pity in older women. Auntie Lu wasn’t an exception.

“Oh, your mother sure is lucky to have such a caring son. Do not worry. Sect Leader Nie is a good man.”

That very much could be a lie. What servant would dare to bad mouth their employer?

“I asked Nie Huaisang, but he was too young when his mother died. He did say that you were his mother’s personal maid, though. Can you tell me about her a bit?”

Auntie Lu sighed, her eyes sad. “She was the gentlest soul I’ve ever met. The disciples saw it as weakness, but with soft words and kindness she ran the household better than anyone. I was proud to work under her.”

That was very different from anything else Meng Yao had heard about Second Mistress Nie.

“She was a concubine at first, right? I’ve heard that sometimes adding concubines to the family can be… difficult.”

He tried to appear naive. His youth made this question appear less invasive and more curious.

“My mistress and late Madam Nie got along really well. Before… I could have sworn they were closest of friends, but perhaps there has been some jealousy underneath. Let’s leave those old wounds in the past.”

“Was First Madam Nie also gentle?” prodded Meng Yao. This was getting dangerously invasive.

Auntie Lu shook her head. “Oh, no, that one was as wild as an untried horse. A true Nie woman, loud as a thunderclap and fierce as a tiger. Everybody knew that she was made for battle, not marriage and motherhood.”

“Young Master Nie speaks often of his stepmother. But he never mentioned his birth mother in my presence.”

“He wouldn’t have much to tell,” said Auntie Lu with disapproval. “Late First Madam treated her own babe as a wild beast, shying away from him and giving Young Master to the nannies. I reckon if it hadn’t been for my Mistress, Young Master wouldn’t have known a mother’s love at all.”

Meng Yao’s heart twisted for Nie Mingjue. Auntie Lu must have realized how inappropriate their conversation had become because she said, “You are a smart boy. You should know not to repeat anything I’ve said carelessly. Do not worry for your mother. Whatever happened, Sect Leader Nie was not to blame for it.”

Meng Yao thanked Auntie Lu for the conversation and left for his rooms deep in thought. If what Auntie Lu said was true, he couldn’t imagine what weight Nie Mingjue was holding on his shoulders. It was simply too tragic.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Nie Mingjue was waiting for him by the door. Meng Yao startled. “Shixiong! Did something happen? Do you need…”

Nie Mingjue cut Meng Yao off. “I just came to tell you that my father has sorted out his affairs and will be there tomorrow. Thank you for your help these past few days. I appreciate it.”

These words sparked a certain giddiness in Meng Yao that was difficult to contain.

“That’s the least I could do for the hospitality that your sect showed my family,” Meng Yao said. He didn’t want to let Nie Mingjue leave so soon. “Would you like some tea?”

“I don’t particularly like tea,” Nie Mingjue said. Then, before the disappointment could hit Meng Yao, he added, “But I could use a break.”

“Come in then, Shixiong,” said Meng Yao, allowing a slight teasing edge to fill his words. That was step fifty-seven: Invite Nie Mingjue for tea.

He silently thanked his mother for drilling the tea ceremony into him. Meng Yao allowed his body to go through the motions while he tried to control his excitement. It was just too strange to see Nie Mingjue in his room.

“I’m sorry for the chaos my brother had caused this morning. I had a serious conversation with him about it,” lied Meng Yao. He felt slightly guilty about tricking Nie Mingjue like this. His lies weren’t harming anyone, but he knew how much Nie Mingjue valued honesty.

“That’s not only your responsibility. Even if Wei Ying instigated it, which we cannot be entirely sure of, Huaisang still participated.”

That scandalous book certainly didn’t belong to Wei Ying. Meng Yao knew his brother’s kind of mischief. He wouldn’t think to buy pornography, and if he did, he would be shameless enough to show it to Meng Yao immediately.

“They are young. Some mistakes are inevitable,” Meng Yao said.

Nie Mingjue nodded instead of answering. He seemed to be thinking of something. A deep wrinkle marked his brow.

“Is something on your mind, Shixiong?” asked Meng Yao, concerned. “You seem… preoccupied.”

“It’s nothing,” Nie Mingjue said. “Huaisang… asked about his mother’s death today. I just wonder whether I went about it correctly.”

“There’s not a single correct way to speak about something so difficult,” said Meng Yao. “Huaisang is more resilient than he appears.”

Nie Mingjue took a sip out of his cup. He didn’t comment on the taste. “I expected him to take it harder. He wasn’t upset.”

“Did you want him to be upset?” Meng Yao asked softly.

Nie Mingjue frowned. “I don’t know. Moth… My late stepmother was so good to me. After her death, I tried to fill the void of her absence with stories. I thought that was what I owed her.” He looked down at his cup. “It seems that I’ve failed.”

“You didn’t fail,” Meng Yao said firmly. Nie Mingjue looked up at him with surprise. “I didn’t know your late stepmother, but I’m sure that all she would have wanted is for you two to be happy. With the way Huaisang adores you, I cannot see how you could have failed his mother’s wish.”

“Huaisang is a spoiled brat,” said Nie Mingjue, but his face relaxed slightly.

“That’s because you can’t deny him anything,” Meng Yao said. “It’s hard to say no when their eyes go all wide and wet.”

“Huaisang just starts crying. And he is loud about it. I know he’s faking it, but I still can’t refuse him.”

They swapped stories about their little brothers for a while after that. Gradually the tension went out of Nie Mingjue's shoulders and his face relaxed completely. Meng Yao was happy that he could help.

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[1] A Chinese idiom and euphemism for male homosexuality or same-sex love, originating from a 1st-century BCE tale of devotion. It refers to Emperor Ai of Han, who cut off his silk sleeve rather than wake his lover, Dong Xian, who was sleeping on it. return to text ↩

[2] The prefix Xiao- (ㄒㄧㄠˇ) attached to part of a given name is an affectionate way to address a child or younger acquaintance. It's less intimate than prefix A-, which Meng Yao and Wei Ying use, but still a very warm form of address.return to text ↩

[3]A Chinese idiom for pornography or explicit material. return to text ↩

Chapter 34: The foundation.

Nie Hongyi emerged from his seclusion in time to see the Jiangs off. His performance was smooth, the laughter booming over the courtyard as he traded jokes and farewells with Jiang Fengmian. Shen Jiu had learned his ways well enough to see through it. The tension was there, in the set of his shoulders and in the way his smiles didn't quite reach his eyes.

The tension lingered even after the Jiangs became distant figures against the gray sky. Shen Jiu didn’t know how to do away with the awkwardness. Meng Yao, who had been glancing at the two of them subtly, surely had a lot of ideas by now.

Shen Jiu had no skill for mending bridges between him and other people. So when Nie Hongyi began to walk away, Shen Jiu followed. "Arrange a meeting with Nie Zhenren for me,” he ordered.

"Haven't you spoken to him already?" asked Nie Hongyi, his voice flat. Shen Jiu did not understand why he suddenly felt longing for the sense of irritation that the sect leader used to provoke in him. Now he was just… bland.

Shen Jiu had almost snapped at him, the truth on his tongue. ‘I need to investigate your wife’s qi deviation and if I ask you, you’ll lock yourself up in your office again.‘

For a moment, he almost said it anyway. Let Nie Hongyi lock himself away. What did Shen Jiu care? But then Shen Jiu met his eyes. He could recognise the eyes of a person who was hanging by a thread.

He lied. "He is older than your regular Nie elder. An outlier. I want to figure out why he hasn't deviated."

The angle of inquiry was Meng Yao's, though Shen Jiu would never admit it aloud. His son had proven helpful in the investigation of Nie Hongyi's wives, so Shen Jiu decided to tell him about the sabers. He had yet to regret it.

"That might be worth pursuing." Nie Hongyi's brow furrowed. "I've wondered about it myself, over the years. I just never wanted to question the good luck too closely."

"Are there others like him?" Shen Jiu asked. Meng Yao had suggested this line of inquiry once they finished with Nie Zhuli. It wasn’t a bad idea.

"A few," Nie Hongyi said, some of his usual energy returning. "I'll have Nie Zhenren meet you tomorrow. And I'll arrange for you to speak with the others."

"That will be appreciated," said Shen Jiu stiffly. He turned to leave.

"Madam Shen," called Nie Hongyi. "That night… If I frightened you, I'm..."

"As if you could frighten me," huffed Shen Jiu interrupting the annoying apology. "Don't be ridiculous."

"Good," Nie Hongyi said stiffly. When he was like this, his similarity with his eldest was more pronounced.

Shen Jiu nodded. As far as he was concerned, the matter was closed.

He planned to extract himself from this conversation, but then Nie Hongyi had to open his mouth again: "I hope the Jiangs weren't offended by my absence."

"How should I know?" snapped Shen Jiu. The aggression left him quickly, leaving the uncomfortably prickly feeling behind. "You didn't invite them, so it's not like you owe them entertainment. If they were bored, it was their own fault for imposing themselves on us."

"You, Madam Shen, are clearly no politician." The spark of laughter was back in Nie Hongyi's eyes. Shen Jiu was relieved to see it come back.

"I've had enough of politics to last several lifetimes." Shen Jiu paused, remembering his conversations with Yu Ziyuan. "Count yourself fortunate you avoided Madam Yu. She would have spent the entire visit trying to convince you to marry me."

Nie Hongyi laughed. "Oh, she was extremely transparent about it. It's clear that she doesn't know you as well as she thinks she does."

"Or she assumes my opinion won't matter," said Shen Jiu.

He didn't know why he said that.

An echo of Qiu Haitang's bell-like voice rang in his ear, making him wince: 'Now you are my fiancé, A-Jiu! I'm so happy that I can marry the one I love.' She had never asked him whether he was happy. He had been ready to lie but she hadn't asked.

"I'm not interested in remarrying. But even if I were… I would never force anyone. Not into marriage. Not into anything else." Nie Hongyi's face was so earnest. Shen Jiu couldn't bear to look at it.

He muttered something about research, about needing to prepare for tomorrow's meeting, and fled before Nie Hongyi could respond.

The next day, Nie Zhenren's message arrived with a servant. It was succinct: he wanted to meet on the East Wall. As if Shen Jiu was supposed to intuit the exact part of the wall that ran the entire length of the fortress. He was still fuming when he reached the stairs and found the old blacksmith waiting for him at the bottom.

"Hope you don't mind having to climb the stairs," said the man. "As you know, my workshop isn't well suited to receive guests. I thought if we had to speak outside, better to choose something with a view."

What view? The best they could hope for was pines surrounded with more pines. Shen Jiu didn’t argue. It wasn’t like he was the one who wanted a view.

The guard bowed to them as they went up the shaky stairs. He looked at Nie Zhenren with unmistakable respect, while all Shen Jiu received was curiosity.

Once they stood on the wall, looking down on the dense pine forest, Shen Jiu could finally start his interrogation.

“I’ll be frank,” Shen Jiu began. “I’m investigating the source of your daughter’s qi deviation.”

Nie Zhenren didn't react. He kept his gaze fixed forward, as if searching for something of interest among the pines. "If I knew why it happened, Hongyi wouldn't have needed to hire you."

"I'm not expecting the answer," Shen Jiu said. "I'm collecting information, and there's a limited number of people I can ask. Nie Lieyan and Gu Nianyuan told me some of it, but as Nie Zhuli's father, you might know more."

Nie Zhenren's eyebrows rose. "You spoke to Gu Nianyuan about it?" His voice went high with incredulity.

"What's wrong with him?" Shen Jiu asked. "He seemed… devoted to your daughter."

Gu Nianyuan was obviously a biased source, but Shen Jiu expected Nie Zhenren to share some of those biases. Nie Zhuli was his daughter after all.

Nie Zhenren snorted. "He's delusional, that's what he is. Zhuli treated him like a friend. She was grateful because he saved her life once. She even asked Hongyi to hire him as the sect's physician. I told her there was something… not friend-like in the way he looked at her, but she wouldn't listen."

Delusional seemed like the right word to describe that man. Shen Jiu had seen the way Gu Nianyuan spoke of Nie Zhuli: as if her death was his personal tragedy.

“He told me that Nie Zhuli was irritable before her qi deviation because she didn’t approve of her husband’s new concubine,” said Shen Jiu.

Nie Zhenren shook his head. “Nonsense. Zhuli loved Fei Yan. She was the one who pushed Hongyi to court her.”

So many times Shen Jiu had spoken of this woman. Only now did he find out her name. With the name assigned, it was harder to see the tragedy of her life through the lens of logic. She wasn’t a Nie, wasn’t even a cultivator, her story wasn’t needed for solving the cause of deviations, yet she was the main victim of the Nie cultivation method.

Because of that it was all the more startling to hear that she was loved by the woman who brought forth her demise.

“That’s unorthodox,” said Shen Jiu. Wives weren’t supposed to have any kind of warm feelings towards the concubines. That was simply the way things worked.

Nie Zhenren snorted. "There's nothing orthodox about the Nie. Some of us forget that." He paused, his gaze still fixed on the pines. "Zhuli… she wasn't made to be a sect leader's wife. I told her that when Hongyi began courting her. If she'd married anyone else, she could have done whatever she wanted. But the Sect Leader needs heirs… as many as possible, because children die so easily and the main bloodline needs an heir. There are duties that can't be avoided." His voice grew tired. "She didn't listen to her old father. Of course she didn't. Why would she?"

“Children never listen,” Shen Jiu said morosely.

“At first they were fine, happy even. But the elders pushed for them to get an heir. Zhuli’s mother died during childbirth, so she had this fear… When she agreed it seemed like she was over it, but as the pregnancy continued… It’s like all life was being sucked out of her. The birth nearly killed her, and after…” Nie Zhenren sighed, his voice very tired. “The first few months after the birth were a nightmare. I’ve never seen my daughter cry that much. I had to drag her on a night hunt myself, just to see the life back in her eyes.”

Shen Jiu shuddered. “Did that help?”

“She got better with time, but she never could bond with Mingjue properly. I think she felt guilty for those first few months when she rejected him.”

“So she decided that her husband had to take a concubine if he was to have more children,” concluded Shen Jiu.

“That’s what they told the elders,” said Nie Zhenren, his voice amused. “But… when Fei Yan got pregnant, Zhuli didn’t take it well. She went away on night hunts as much as she could, until she got reckless and hurt her leg. You know what happened next.”

No matter how many times Shen Jiu turned it over in his mind, it didn't cohere. The only thread connecting the early deviations was heart demons. That explained nothing. Countless people carried heart demons without their qi collapsing.

Why did the cheerful Nie Bouhou deviate while Nie Hongyi seemed fine? Weren’t they both hiding their grief behind a boisterous laugh? It could be a matter of time, but even so… With his wife and daughter dead, Nie Zhenren had to have his own share of heart demons. However, not only did he not deviate, he lived longer than most of the Nie. Meng Yao was right. This was something worth exploring.

“Have you ever experienced the symptoms of qi instability?” asked Shen Jiu.

Nie Zhenren side-eyed him. “You too think it strange that I haven’t died yet?”

“From what I’ve observed, you are unusually old,” said Shen Jiu. He was never easy to shame.

"After my daughter died, my Guonian[1] grew particularly hungry." Guonian… That was his saber, Shen Jiu realized. The man had this strange habit of speaking of sabers as if they were family members. "I thought it was my time. One last hunt, I told myself. Feed him properly before the end. But after that… I decided I was done. I haven't gone on a night hunt since."

Shen Jiu blinked. That had to be thirteen years without night hunting. It was unprecedented.

“Did the saber's call quiet on its own?” asked Shen Jiu. How did he not know it before? It was vital information for his research.

“Yes. Guonian is still alive, I can feel him. But he is pleased enough with drills and occasional flying.”

"Master Nie." Shen Jiu's voice sharpened. "I need you to remember the exact moment your saber's call began to quiet. What were you doing? This is important."

“I don’t know what happened,” Nie Zhenren said. “Fei Yan just came one day to interrupt my seclusion. She had Dilong’s[2] shards with her… that was Zhuli’s saber.”

“It broke?” asked Shen Jiu. Why did no one mention this before?

“The sabers break if they’re used to harm their masters severely,” said Nie Zhenren as if it was some common rule of the universe. “In this case it’s traditional to use the shard when forging the new sabers. Fei Yan… Fei Yan said that she wanted me to make my grandchildren’s sabers before I retire.”

“So your saber calmed down when you were making those sabers?” asked Shen Jiu.

“Not at once, but yes. It took a while to make Baxia and Fuxi[3], and Fei Yan came often with Mingjue. She said he should see the making of his saber.”

It struck Shen Jiu as strange that Fei Yan wasn’t bothered by the sabers after she was hurt by one, nor did she seem to care that she was putting her children on the cultivation path that could lead to their demise. Perhaps she was more Nie than Nie Lieyan gave her credit for.

“Was your saber silent ever since?” asked Shen Jiu.

Nie Zhenren frowned. “Guonian began screaming again after Fei Yan died, but I had no time to feed him. My grandchildren needed me. Hongyi wasn’t in a good enough state to make sure they were fine, so I had to do it. Guonian calmed down on his own in a few months.”

Everything suggested that saber wielder’s mental state was important, but it couldn’t be the only reason for deviations. Shen Jiu felt like the answers were close enough to brush with his fingertips.

The next day, Shen Jiu was supposed to visit another elderly Nie with Nie Hongyi. But before they could leave, their children intercepted them. It was strange to see Xue Yang and Nie Huaisang together like this. Shen Jiu couldn’t remember seeing them together without Wei Ying or Meng Yao before.

"Father, can you tell Xue Yang that Uncle Lieyan can't be teaching him wrong?" asked Nie Huaisang, looking put upon. He had his fan out despite the lingering snow. Even Shen Jiu thought it was too much and he used to carry a fan around no matter the season.

“Why would Nie Lieyan be teaching you anything?” asked Shen Jiu suspiciously as he looked down at the scowling brat. He had a speck of dirt on his cheek. Shen Jiu reached out and wiped it away with his thumb.

Xue Yang’s face scrunched up as if he had eaten a lemon, but he didn’t flinch away. “Because he is my tutor,” the brat said.

“Since when is he your tutor?” asked Shen Jiu incredulously.

“Since the beginning,” said Xue Yang, his tone doubting Shen Jiu’s intelligence.

"Why would you put that man in charge of a child?" Shen Jiu turned to glare at Nie Hongyi.

Nie Lieyan disliked outsiders. Who knew how he might have sabotaged Xue Yang's education? Didn’t the boy say he was being taught wrong?

“I think I was drunk when I appointed him,” said Nie Hongyi absentmindedly. He raised his hands defensively as Shen Jiu's glare intensified. "But he's competent. You can't argue with that!"

“I went to a lesson with other disciples so I could beat them up,” Xue Yang said shamelessly. “Their instructions were different.”

Something unpleasant twisted in Shen Jiu's stomach. That sounded a lot like what he had done to… He pushed the thought away.

“Explain,” Shen Jiu ordered. “What exactly was different?”

“Madam Shen…” began Nie Hongyi. He seemed almost frantic.

“Later,” Shen Jiu interrupted. “This is important.”

He should have been paying attention. No one could be trusted with his children’s education. Shen Jiu knew better than anyone how a teacher could ruin their student’s future.

But as Shen Jiu listened to the boy explain the differences in meditation techniques and basic qi circulation that he had observed, his fear gave way to confusion.

Nie Lieyan taught Xue Yang correctly. The ones who were being taught wrong, the way Shen Jiu once had been, were the Nie disciples. Why would the disciples of an established sect be taught this way? The foundation produced was weak and… susceptible to qi deviations.

“Nie Lieyan is teaching you correctly,” Shen Jiu said to Xue Yang. “The Nie cultivation method is just different. Now Sect Leader Nie and I need to discuss something of import.”

They went back inside, heading for Nie Hongyi's office. With every step the anger grew stronger inside Shen Jiu's chest, making him stifle it, lest they make a scene.

"You lied to me," Shen Jiu said as soon as they were behind a closed door. He was surprised to hear his voice come out so calm.

"I didn't lie. I just didn't…" began Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu interrupted. "I asked for manuals. The ones you gave me were regular ones, but that's not the way of your sect, is it?"

"The disciples are taught both ways," said Nie Hongyi. "And the Nie way isn't written down. We couldn't risk it getting in the wrong hands."

If the method became known, it would cause a scandal. Shen Jiu knew from experience that this method of foundation building was damaging, making the cultivator prone to qi deviations. No cultivation sect would approve of doing that to young disciples.

It didn't make sense.

"Why would you even ask me to investigate? It's clear that the deviations happen because the foundation is faulty."

"It's not faulty. We simply need a different method of qi circulation to bond with our sabers."

"You're missing the point." Shen Jiu's calm cracked. "The way you cultivate... it makes qi deviation inevitable. I wouldn't have wasted my time if you'd told me the truth from the beginning."

Nie Hongyi groaned. "It's not… it will be easier just to show you. Can you check my meridians?"

"Of course I can!" Shen Jiu reached out, wrapping his fingers around the wrist. They didn't meet, Nie Hongyi's wrist too thick for his hand to circle completely. Still, he could read the qi flow well enough.

He frowned. "That's…" It didn't make sense.

He expected to see something similar to the foundation he had in his previous life. However, what he saw was a perfectly normal system.

"I don't understand," said Shen Jiu quietly.

"When a Nie cultivator bonds with their saber, it adjusts the cultivation system. We're not sure exactly how it works, but if the foundation is steady, the sabers refuse to bond."

That was simply bizarre.

"And you didn't think that this was important for my research?" asked Shen Jiu, letting go of Nie Hongyi's wrist.

“It’s the sect’s secret. I’ve already told you too much,” said Nie Hongyi. “I've been monitoring your findings. I would have known if you were getting somewhere."

"Is there anything else you haven't told me?" Shen Jiu's eyes narrowed.

Nie Hongyi didn't answer. The guilty slump of his shoulders was answer enough.

Shen Jiu knew that Nie Hongyi had yet to tell him how the sabers were disposed of after their wielders died. What else was he hiding?

"Should we set out to see my uncle?" Nie Hongyi asked. "It's getting late, and he lives far away."

As if Shen Jiu could care about it now! Should he even continue the research? He had already gone so far, it didn’t feel right to quit.

“Not now,” said Shen Jiu. “I need to think… I also wanted to ask whether you have any more of your father’s diaries. The last tome is dated months before his death.”

"He stopped keeping them after my mother died," Nie Hongyi said. "The ones you have are all there are."

"I see," Shen Jiu said, already far away in his thoughts.

He was missing something. Shen Jiu needed a different perspective. Meng Yao… but what would his son know about unorthodox cultivation methods? His feet carried him to the training ground before he could think it through.

He watched silently as Wei Ying and Meng Yao went through their forms. Their movements were graceful, polished. They couldn't have learned any wrong techniques from the Nie, right? Nie Mingjue had to know that their methods were poisonous for a regular cultivator. But if he didn't… No, that was absurd. They kept their techniques secret for a reason, and the only difference seemed to be at the foundational level. Any worry was unwarranted.

Xue Yang! No, the boy was being taught correctly. It was why the issue had come to Shen Jiu's attention in the first place. Xue Yang was fine. Unless he tried to copy some of the techniques he'd seen! Shen Jiu would have to impress upon him… But he wouldn't listen. When had anyone ever listened to Shen Jiu?

Yue Qingyuan had. He’d listened to Shen Jiu when he demanded that the disciple with potential even Liu Qingge deigned to praise had to come to his peak. He’d listened when Shen Jiu said that he knew how to punish his own disciples and the sect leader should mind his own business. Why had he listened to him?

Shen Jiu bit down on his lower lip. The taste of blood brought back his first qi deviation. Back when he hadn't known what a deviation was, hadn't known that the methods he was using were slowly destroying him. Wu Yanzi hadn't corrected him. Why would he? Even if he'd known proper techniques, he wouldn't have wasted them on the likes of Shen Jiu.

By the time he reached Cang Qiong, his foundation was ruined. He'd been so bitter about it that he'd written a step-by-step guide to destroying one's foundation and given it to Luo Binghe. That damned brat, with his hopeful eyes and the potential even Liu Qingge had noticed! The manual was supposed to kill him. Now that Shen Jiu was gone from Cang Qiong, would it? Would someone notice? What would they say about him once they found out? That they'd known all along he was rotten? What would Yue Qingyuan say?

Shen Jiu watched Wei Ying's laughing face in the pit below as the disciples began to disperse. He watched the smile on Meng Yao's face as he spoke to Nie Mingjue about something. He should never have accepted responsibility for any children.

Surely he'd ruin them. Make them as rotten as he was.

If Nie Lieyan had deliberately taught Xue Yang wrong and the brat had had a qi deviation, that would be only fair. If Yue Ziyuan had whipped Wei Ying bloody, that would be only fair. If Meng Yao were reviled for the way Shen Jiu had taught him, that would be…

“Mother?” asked Meng Yao gently. “Did you come to watch us train?”

"I need your help," Shen Jiu said, surprising even himself. "No matter how I look at it, it doesn't make sense…"

“We need Wei Ying,” said Meng Yao with startling confidence.

“Whatever for?” asked Shen Jiu. Wei Ying was smart, he couldn’t deny that. But the boy had no attention span, especially if he wasn’t interested in something. He also tended to run his mouth, which was distracting.

“I haven’t told you, but I knew about the resentment in the sabers long before you told me. I knew because Wei Ying had figured it out.”

Shen Jiu blinked. He didn’t think Wei Ying would pay enough attention to notice. Perhaps he had underestimated him.

“Fine. Drag him to my room once you find him,” said Shen Jiu.

Meng Yao blinked. "But he is…" He looked behind at the pit. "He was just there. When did he… Oh, please give me a moment, Mother."

Meng Yao hurried off to track down his brother. Shen Jiu watched his retreating back, feeling numb. Why was he even doing this? This research? It wasn't his problem, was it? But what else was he supposed to do?

He walked to his rooms and slumped behind his worktable. His hair felt too tight. Shen Jiu ripped the hairpins out and dropped them onto the table with a metallic clang. The children were coming. He had to pull himself together. He dropped his elbows onto his knees and put his head in his hands, breathing hard.

‘System,’ he thought. ‘What am I doing here?’

[User is sitting down and waiting for Meng Yao and Wei Ying to arrive to continue the investigation]

“That’s not,” said Shen Jiu out loud and groaned. ‘That’s not what I meant,’ he thought. ‘Why did you send me here?’

[User should not be having memory issues. This System briefed User before installation. To repeat the briefing, you can pay 500 Lore Points. Do you accept?]

‘Damn you. Yes, I remember,’ thought Shen Jiu furiously. ‘I just want to know why you couldn’t choose some other dead cultivator to take care of A-Yao. Somebody who isn’t… Perhaps a woman would…’

[User is being irrational. Proceed with the investigation.]

‘What do you care about this investigation?’ thought Shen Jiu. ‘I don’t know why I even agreed!’

[User enjoys the feeling of intellectual superiority. Also, the User was tired of having to sleep outside.]

“How do you… oh, forget it, just shut up. I don’t know why I even asked you!” said Shen Jiu out loud.

A moment later, a knock came at the door. He just hoped the children hadn't heard him talking to himself. And his hair… it was too late to fix it in any case. The only way was to continue as if it was intentional. That usually worked for him.

“Shizun! Yao-ge is mean to me,” yapped Wei Ying as soon as he entered the room.

“Whatever he has done, I approve of it,” said Shen Jiu. “Now sit down and listen.”

Meng Yao gave Shen Jiu a concerned look as the two of them sat down. That was probably because of the hair.

“What I’ll tell you about today can’t go outside this sect,” began Shen Jiu. “Not even the Jiangs can know.”

He gave Wei Ying a pointed look, which was smoothly ignored. This was more performative than anything. Wei Ying wasn’t too bad about keeping secrets, he just needed to be instructed what was a secret in the first place.

“We will be careful, Mother,” said Meng Yao dutifully.

“Today I’ve discovered that the Nie cultivators deliberately cultivate an unsteady foundation to bond with their sabers. After the bond is in place, the cultivation system somehow fixes itself, I’ve checked that personally, but most of them still succumb to qi deviations later in life…”

Shen Jiu spoke at length, laying out most of the details. Partly to inform Wei Ying, partly to organize his own thoughts. It felt like he was on the brink of a discovery, but something was still missing.

“What do you think?” said Shen Jiu in the end, feeling out of breath.

“I think you should keep interviewing the elderly. Wei Ying and I could help you with it,” said Meng Yao.

“Why ask the elderly when we can talk to the founders?” asked Wei Ying. “If the Nie don’t write down their cultivation method completely, perhaps something was lost between generations. They can’t speak to their ancestor, but we can.”

That was… not a bad idea.

“A-Ying, this is blasphemy,” said Meng Yao gently. “The Nie might be using resentment energy in their cultivation, but that doesn’t mean they would approve of bothering the spirits of their ancestors this way.”

“Who cares about that?” asked Wei Ying. “Their ancestors will forgive us if that saves their descendants from dying young.”

“The Sect will never approve,” began Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu interrupted, “Then we aren’t going to ask. Come on. I know the place that is perfect for summoning.”

Shen Jiu stood up, but Meng Yao stopped him before he could leave the room. “Mother, are you sure you’ve thought this through?”

“Do you want your precious Nie Mingjue to die in his thirties like his mother?” asked Shen Jiu sharply. Meng Yao shook his head, his shoulders slumped. “Then don’t get in my way.”

"Mother, wait!" Meng Yao's voice was loud. He had rarely raised it like that at Shen Jiu. "Your hair," he added, more quietly, almost soothing.

That’s right. Shen Jiu still had his hair undone.

“Sit down,” said Meng Yao softly. “Let me help you. Like you used to do for me when I was little.”

"I'm not an invalid! I can do it myself," Shen Jiu said, but it was hard to refuse Meng Yao, especially when he looked at him with such pleading eyes. It occurred to Shen Jiu that the boy was now a little bit taller than him. When had that happened?

"I know," Meng Yao said gently. "But isn't it nice to have people care for you sometimes? I always liked it when you brushed my hair."

Reluctantly, Shen Jiu sat down.

"Have I told you how I took A-Yang to feed the horses?" asked Wei Ying, sitting so he would face Shen Jiu.

Shen Jiu scoffed. “I hope the horse bit him.”

Wei Ying laughed. “Of course it didn’t. The Nie horses are very gentle. Though A-Yang did bite the horse… But let me start from the beginning!”

As he listened to Wei Ying babble about Xue Yang and the horses, with Meng Yao's deft hands working through his hair, Shen Jiu felt a weight slowly lifting from his shoulders. He could breathe.

He didn't know why he was here. He was sure he wasn't worthy to be in these children's lives. In fact, it would be better for them to have anyone but him looking after them. But he was here. He had them. And he wouldn't allow anything or anyone to take them away.

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[1] Guònián (过年) — Nie Zhenren's Saber.

Guònián means "to celebrate the New Year" or "to pass the year." The name derives from the legendary monster Nián (年), a beast that would rise from the sea each year to devour villagers until it was discovered that the creature feared loud noises, bright lights, and the color red, all of which are used in Chinese New Year celebrations. return to text ↩

[2] Dìlóng (地龙) — Nie Zhuli's Saber.

Dìlóng means "Earth Dragon." return to text ↩

[3] Bàxià (霸下) — Nie Mingjue's Saber.

Bàxià (also known as Bìxì, 赑屃) is one of the nine sons of the dragon (lóngshēng jiǔzǐ, 龙生九子). He is depicted as a massive dragon-turtle strong enough to carry mountains on his back. Legend says Baxia originally used its strength to move mountains and stir seas, causing chaos until tamed by King Yu the Great to assist in water management.

To curb its destructive nature after the floods subsided, Yu made Bixi carry a heavy stele documenting the deeds of emperors and sages. This established the tradition of placing monumental inscriptions on Bixi's back to ensure they last for thousands of years.

Fùxì (负屃) — Nie Huaisang's Saber.

Fùxì is also one of the nine dragon sons. While his elder brother Baxia carries the physical weight of stone steles, Fuxi coils around their tops, guarding the inscriptions themselves. He is the literary dragon, associated with calligraphy, poetry, and the preservation of memory.

return to text ↩

Original characters in this chapter:

Niè Hóngyì (聂弘毅) — Hóng (great, vast), Yì (resolute, steadfast)
Sect Leader of Qinghe Nie. Jovial, dramatic, rumored to have murdered his wives, drinks too much.

Niè Zhēnrén (聂真人) — Zhēn (true, genuine), Rén (person)
Sect blacksmith. Nie Zhuli's father. Old, scarred, blunt. Forged sabers for sixty years. Helped repair Hongyi's saber.

Niè Lièyán (聂烈岩) — Liè (ardent, fierce), Yán (rock, cliff)
Nie Hongyi's cousin and second-in-command. Blunt, suspicious of outsiders, loyal to Nie Hongyi. Has a thick mustache.

Gu Niànyuǎn (顾念远) — Niàn (to think of), Yuǎn (distant)
Sect physician. Bitter, resentful, despises the Nie cultivation method. His relationship with Nie Hongyi is strained. Harbored unrequited romantic feelings for Nie Zhuli.

Niè Zhūlì (聂铸丽) — Zhù (to cast/mold metal), Lì (beautiful)
Nie Hongyi's first wife. Nie Mingjue's mother. Died by suicide after her qi deviation injured her husband's concubine. Feared childbirth, struggled to bond with Mingjue.

Féi Yàn (飞燕) — Fēi (to fly), Yàn (swallow)
Nie Hongyi's second wife (originally a concubine). Nie Huaisang's mother. Used to be a dancer. Badly injured during Nie Zhuli's qi deviation, gave birth prematurely, never fully recovered. Died by overdose of pain medication four years later.

Chapter 35: The Dancing Swallow.

The first time Wei Ying pointed out a soul specter to Shen Jiu was about a year after he'd started taking the boy to the Burial Mounds. It felt like a draft, a cold spot in the house, its resentment so weak he had to concentrate to feel it. There was a reason, he supposed, why Wei Wuxian would be hailed as a genius.

Back then, his progress on the ghost path had stalled, so Shen Jiu was eager to experiment. He siphoned his own resentment into the specter[1], but the result was underwhelming: a spirit that could speak and follow simple requests. They were too weak to use as a weapon, and he soon abandoned them to focus on a ghost summoning talisman, which seemed like a more promising endeavor.

The talisman was something he remembered from his previous life. Wu Yanzi had used it once, on a job where they were paid to stage a vengeful ghost attack. Shen Jiu had only seen it that one time, but he'd spent months reconstructing it through trial and error. When he finally succeeded, the ghost he summoned nearly killed him and Wei Ying both. After that, he decided that the talismans were too dangerous to use.

Now, with a golden core and a mystery to solve, Shen Jiu considered the talisman again. All he needed was a name and a place. The Ancestral Hall would do. He was certain that even if the ghost attacked him, angered at being torn from the Underworld[2], he could subdue it with qin music. He did not doubt he could make it talk. He did doubt Nie Hongyi’s reaction if he found out.

Would he banish him? It was a real possibility.

Shen Jiu considered going through with it anyway. He wanted answers. The veneration of ancestors at the cost of the living struck him as foolish. If the Nie founders had created this flawed method, they owed their descendants answers. He could do the ritual without anyone finding out.

Still, something didn’t allow Shen Jiu to go through with it once his head was clear. That left only one path for them. He needed permission.

“I have a way to find much more information about the history of your sect’s cultivation style. Hear me out before you object,” said Shen Jiu.

“That’s a promising start,” quipped Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu took a breath. “I have a way to summon the spirit of someone who isn’t in this world.”

Nie Hongyi’s face lost all traces of amusement as he stared at him. For a long moment, he didn't speak. “What way?” he asked.

“A talisman,” Shen Jiu said, choosing his words carefully. “I could use it to question one of the founders of your cultivation method. There must be information that was lost between generations.”

Nie Hongyi frowned. “Where did you even get something so vile?”

“The one who showed me how to do it is long dead,” Shen Jiu confessed. “The method is sound. The spirit will be… displeased to be disturbed, but after interrogation it will return to the underworld.”

“And if the person is in the Heavenly Realm[3] or already reincarnated?” asked Nie Hongyi, his jaw tense.

“Then I assume… the summoning will fail,” said Shen Jiu.

He hadn’t considered this issue. Even if the Heavenly Realm existed, he doubted many Nie ancestors had reached it. Their cultivation method was too far from orthodoxy. As for reincarnation… Shen Jiu couldn’t be too sure, but after he had died in his first life all he saw was darkness. Though whatever had happened to him could be considered a strange form of reincarnation.

“I cannot permit it,” said Nie Hongyi, shaking his head. “Even if I dared to bother my ancestors this way… your method is clearly untried. What if it gets in the way of somebody’s reincarnation or creates an overpowered ghost? Whatever answers we can get from it aren’t worth it.”

“It’s not worth saving your sons from dying like your… father did?” Shen Jiu said venomously.

He had almost said wife. The words were on his tongue when he changed his mind.

He knew it would hurt. That’s why he wanted to say it. That’s why he didn’t say it.

“We can find another way,” said Nie Hongyi firmly.

Another way…

Shen Jiu considered his options. “There is another method. It doesn’t bring anybody to our world, just gives power to the specters that are already there. They lack resentment, but still stay behind, drawn to people and places connected to their past.” Nie Hongyi didn’t interrupt his explanation, so Shen Jiu was emboldened. “I have no guarantee that your ancestors will be among them, but if I spoke to the specters in your Ancestral Hall it’s possible I could learn something from them.”

“You want to defile our Ancestral Hall?” asked Nie Hongyi.

“It’s already soaked in resentment considering its location,” Shen Jiu said. “You can come if you’re afraid I might do something ‘vile’.”

Nie Hongyi was silent for a long moment. “I don’t like it, but… I suppose that’s acceptable.”

Shen Jiu nodded.

It wasn't a perfect victory, but it was better than nothing.

They met after nightfall, when the yin energy[4] would be stronger. Shen Jiu wasn't sure how many specters he could support, but he expected that if he couldn't continue Wei Ying would do it in his stead.

"You want to involve your children?" asked Nie Hongyi. His tone was accusing, which was a sure way to set Shen Jiu off.

"It would do you well to involve your children more. They bear the family curse just like you do. Does Nie Huaisang even know that you set him up for a future qi deviation?"

Nie Hongyi looked aside sullenly. "Do whatever you want. They are your children."

Then Nie Hongyi opened the squeaky gate of the courtyard, its wood old and cracked. There was no lock. Why would there be one with the wall so low, even a non-cultivator could climb over it easily? Shen Jiu let the Sect Leader take the lead, following him down the stone path.

The air was cold, colder than outside the courtyard. Shen Jiu didn't need to concentrate to feel the resentment soaked into the ground.

They didn't bring a light, their cultivation allowing them to find their way in the dark. A light source could, in fact, get in the way of their mission, scaring away weakened specters. The darkness engulfed them, stifling like a grave. He glanced back to make sure that Wei Ying and Meng Yao were following.

The door of the Ancestral Hall was locked, so Nie Hongyi produced a large iron key from his pocket. The Hall itself was small, smaller than the one at Lotus Pier. It could fit ten people at best, its ceiling low like the lid of a coffin.

The name plates stood on the old wooden table, the surface covered in cuts. Shen Jiu guessed this was where they carved the animals. Old blood had soaked into the grooves, making them stark against the wood. It was difficult to understand why people who honored their relatives in such a place were so against necromancy.

"There are so many of them," said Wei Ying quietly, breaking the silence. "It's like a cemetery."

Nie Hongyi said nothing, his eyes fixed on the name plates[5]. "Nie Zhuli" was written on one of them, and then "Fei Yan" right next to it.

"Has this place ever been purified?" asked Shen Jiu, looking at Nie Hongyi. The man was lost in thought.

"Probably," Nie Hongyi said. "When it became the Ancestral Hall it must have been purified."

"It clearly wasn't enough," said Shen Jiu, taking in the specters around them.

Wei Ying was right. It was like a cemetery. It also reminded him of the walls of the Burial Mounds.

While the fierce corpses were stuck inside the ghosts and specters could go up, with the latter getting corrupted by the ambient resentment of the Burial Mounds. Shen Jiu hadn't realised how dangerous it was until he was almost pushed down the wall by something he couldn't see. He would have fallen if Wei Ying hadn't grabbed him, his small size barely enough to stop the two of them from falling.

Nie Hongyi finally looked at him, a fake smile on his face. "So how are you going to do it? Do you need to spill some pig blood or light some candles?

Shen Jiu scoffed. "Don't be absurd. All I need is to siphon some energy into a specter."

Nie Hongyi frowned, his forced cheer gone as quickly as it appeared. "Isn't it dangerous? Won't they attack us?"

Shen Jiu shook his head. "The specters are usually peaceful. They didn't have enough resentment in them to become proper ghosts. They are also not strong. The best they can do is try to throw something at you."

He turned to Meng Yao, who had been silent so far, his face uncharacteristically grim. "A-Yao, I'll be busy supporting the specters, so you should help Sect Leader Nie interrogate them. You know what questions to ask."

Nie Hongyi raised his eyebrows at that but didn't say anything. As if he was the one to talk with his habit of throwing his responsibility onto Nie Mingjue the moment things became hard. Shen Jiu might have stretched the truth, but it was for a good reason. Meng Yao was better at talking to people. Saying it out loud would be too embarrassing, so Shen Jiu had to make an excuse.

"And what am I supposed to do?" asked Wei Ying eagerly. Out of all of them, he was the only one completely unaffected by the ambiance of the place.

Shen Jiu didn't know why the boy was like that. It was the same with the Burial Mounds, although Wei Ying did appear intimidated the first few times they came there.

"You will take over for me if I get drained," Shen Jiu explained. "You can also assist with interrogation but only if you are sure that your question will help."

Wei Ying nodded. It was time to get to it.

Shen Jiu held his breath as he focused on a specter that was close to the entrance. Slowly it took the form of a woman, stocky and short like a barrel. Her face was uninterested as she looked at them silently. Giving the specter a form was easier than granting her an ability to speak.

"Declare your intentions!" demanded the woman, crossing her arms in front of her chest. Her roar was muted as if coming through water. Shen Jiu decided not to waste resentment on

trying to make it louder.

“Excuse us for the disturbance, honored ancestor,” said Nie Hongyi smoothly, punctuating the apology with a short bow. “We meant no offence. We are here to inquire about the saber curse…”

The woman scoffed. “Such pretty words! Are you a Nie or some perfumed court fool?”

Nie Hongyi gave Shen Jiu a strange look as if he was the one responsible for his ancestor’s rudeness.

Meanwhile, the woman continued, “What is there to ask about it? You fight with honor, you die with honor. You lay your blade, you die a coward’s death.”

“Pardon me, honored elder, but we are trying to determine whether there is a way to stop the curse from taking any more lives,” Meng Yao said quickly.

The woman turned to him. “And who are you? A Wen? No, with those fox-like eyes you can only be a…” Shen Jiu stopped the trickle of resentful energy and the woman’s specter became silent before losing its form. Meng Yao’s eyes were narrowed as he looked at him. Nie Hongyi and Wei Ying just seemed confused.

“I suddenly lost the connection. Let’s try another one,” Shen Jiu said.

Nobody questioned him. Meng Yao probably knew that he lied but there was no way for him to prove it.

The next specter was useless, rambling about everything except their questions. He was really invested in knowing whether Nie Hongyi was his descendant. Shen Jiu cut the man off quickly. The third one, however, was promising.

“What curse are you talking about?” asked the man, his moustache reaching his waist.

“The saber curse,” explained Nie Hongyi. “The one that causes qi deviations.”

The specter’s eyes widened. “What insanity has happened in the future? We made the sabers to stop the qi deviations.”

“What?” asked Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu could relate.

Meng Yao smoothed it quickly. “Could you please tell us how you began using the sabers? The story had been lost to time.”

The man looked thoughtful. “I ought to. Can’t have you not knowing your own past. I’m a rotten story-teller though. So it started here… in a small mountain village. A dragon made his nest close to here and it took all our game. We had no money to hire a cultivator to deal with it, so our village began to starve.”

A common tale. Shen Jiu knew villages like that. Cang Qiong usually tried to help everyone, but some people slipped through cracks. The dragon wasn’t killing people directly, so the

problem didn't seem as urgent. Some purists could even think that it wasn't worth intervening.

"Do you at least know who founded your sect boy?" asked the man, looking at Meng Yao with reproach.
"He isn't…" began Nie Hongyi.

"Of course," said Meng Yao. "Nie Ruo, the son of a butcher, and he is known for slaying a dragon, so this part has carried over."

Nie Hongyi seemed surprised. He shouldn't have underestimated Meng Yao.

The specter nodded in approval. "Yes, Nie Ruo always had this talent… he used to make those figures out of metal and make them move for us children. It was like magic… Even with talent we didn't expect him to come back alive but he did and then he started teaching cultivation tricks to anyone who was willing. I was one of the first ones to join."

Shen Jiu bit at the inside of his cheek, reminded of his own youth. Raw talent and an abundance of power with no formal guidance… That was familiar and he knew the result.

"The first deviation happened four years later. With the nighthunts we got enough money to hire a cultivating doctor. He said that our method was an abomination that would kill us all. However, when he checked the Sect Leader he could only see his strength."

Just like what Shen Jiu saw when he checked Nie Hongyi. He could understand the doctor's confusion.

"His saber fixed the crooked base, the core of the dragon stuck inside it. It took us some time to understand how to do it intentionally but there were no deviations after."

The story checked out. He doubted that the specter could add anything more. He was certain that the problem was solved.

Shen Jiu's hands had gone numb. Channeling resentment always left him stiff and cold as a corpse, but now it was like the cold had slipped into his bones, making them ache. He let the spirit dissolve.

Nie Hongyi stood there silently, his face a mask of stone. "So the sabers only delay the deviation," he concluded quietly.

That was the most logical conclusion. The specter must have died before seeing that the sabers didn't help forever.

"Do you still wish to continue passing on your cultivation style if that's the price?" asked Shen Jiu. He couldn't understand it. It was likely too late for Nie Hongyi, but he didn't have to pass it on to his children.

"We can't just abandon our legacy…" began Nie Hongyi, turning to face Shen Jiu. His eyes were desperate. It was like he was begging Shen Jiu to stop with his eyes alone.

“Your legacy is killing you!” Shen Jiu didn’t mean to shout. He didn’t know why he cared in the first place. If the Nie wanted to slowly kill themselves, let them. Not his problem.

“Mother, can you bring that spirit back? I have a question for him,” said Meng Yao, making Shen Jiu break eye contact with Nie Hongyi.

“Only if you’re quick about,” said Shen Jiu. He felt exhausted, but he knew that Meng Yao would hardly ask him to do anything without a good reason why.

The elder with the moustache appeared again, frowning at them. “What else do you want?” he asked, irritated.

“Just one more question, please,” said Meng Yao quickly. “Have you known any people who died of a qi deviation after getting their sabers?”

“Of course not! In thirty years there was no deviations. I’ve told you already, the sabers fixed the problem!” the man paused. “I suppose Nie Ruo deviated, but that wasn’t his saber’s fault. The man went mad with guilt. So many of his students died...” The specter’s voice turned soft in melancholy. “We all thought that he abandoned his saber on purpose. To share their fate, I suppose.”

Shen Jiu wavered on his feet as the connection cut out. Meng Yao caught him by the arm, steadying him.

“Mother?” he asked.

“Just went past my limits.”

“It doesn’t make sense,” Nie Hongyi said. “If they didn’t have qi deviations then why… did our sabers get corrupted over the years?”

Shen Jiu had no answer to that. Perhaps the specter still missed the actual result of their cultivation method, thirty years wasn’t long enough to be certain. Or maybe something did happen to the saber making method…

“Uncle Zhenren hadn’t deviated either,” said Wei Ying.

“We need more information,” concluded Shen Jiu. “Wei Ying, it’s your turn. Choose one specter and channel resentment into it. Don’t overdo it.”

Wei Ying looked around as if choosing a treat in a market stall. He was facing Nie Hongyi when he said: “I think this one wants to speak.”

For a long moment nothing happened. Then a shape of a tall woman in pink robes appeared. Her face couldn’t be seen fully because of the veil. Shen Jiu couldn’t understand at first why she seemed familiar, but then it occurred to him that she looked like Liu Mingyan. How unusual… she wasn’t even in the book, and yet…

Nie Hongyi flinched, taking a step back. The spirit followed, her movements graceful.

“A-Yan?” asked Nie Hongyi, his voice was choked.

Shen Jiu should probably have considered this possibility. It was in fact strange that the woman hadn’t turned into vengeful ghost upon her death. It often happened with those who killed themselves, some even purposefully ended their own life so their ghost would take revenge for them.

“Hongyi!” said the woman, genuine joy shining through her cold demeanour. “I thought I recognised your voice.”

“You… I’m so sorry,” said Nie Hongyi. Shen Jiu could see the tears in his eyes despite the darkness.

“What do you have to be sorry for?” asked Fei Yan. “I was the one who took too much pain relief potion. I should have told the physician that it wasn’t working as well as it used to. I began to take bigger doses and well… Stupid of me, isn’t it?”

Nie Hongyi froze. “You didn’t…”

“Dying wasn’t my intention… We both know how it is with intentions,” the woman said bitterly. “In any case, what are you doing here? It’s the Ancestral Hall, isn’t it?”

“We have been speaking to the spirits of our Ancestors, but that’s not important now…” said Nie Hongyi.

Fei Yan interrupted before he could finish. “Have you summoned Zhuli?” There was urgency in her voice.

Nie Hongyi shook his head solemnly.

Fei Yan sighed, “Well, I suppose that would be too good to be true. I tried to look for her, but… She could have moved on already. I hope she did.”

“You should move on as well,” said Nie Hongyi seriously. “It’s not good for you to stay stuck in this place.”

“I’m not staying at this horror house. Usually I follow…” She turned to the door as if remembering something. “Nie Huaisang, aren’t you going to greet your mother while you can?”

The door opened and Shen Jiu’s wayward student showed his face, squirming under everybody’s looks.

“Huaisang!” barked Nie Hongyi.

But before he could say anything else, Fei Yan raised an imperious hand, “Quit it! Shouting at him won’t make you a decent father. From what I’ve seen, Mingjue is more involved than you are.”

Scolded Nie Hongyi lowered his head, like a child. Meanwhile, Nie Huaisang slowly crept closer, studying his mother as a decorative vase. “You are really beautiful,” he said. Shen Jiu suddenly remembered that under the veil Fei Yan was hiding scars.

She didn’t acknowledge her son’s words. Fei Yan turned her attention to her child, annoyance evaporating. “You have grown,” she said warmly. “I couldn’t see you well before. You might outgrow your father.”

She said it so conversationally that Shen Jiu wasn’t sure whether it was a joke or just a statement.

“Are you calling me short, A-Yan?” asked Nie Hongyi playfully. He was quick to recover it appeared.

“I’m describing you as short,” said Fei Yan flatly, but her eyes looked pleased. Shen Jiu had a feeling that he was witnessing some kind of mating ritual. That was disgusting.

“I saw your paintings,” said Nie Huaisang. “I like to paint too. And I have your old fans. Master Shen had been teaching me how to dance with them. It’s really hard, but I like it.”

That was a stupid way to blurt out their secret, but Shen Jiu decided to let it slide. The boy was obviously having some kind of emotions.

“I’m glad,” said Fei Yan. She reached her hand to touch her son’s face, but it went through, incorporeal. “Good fans need to be used. I always wanted my child to have them.”

“Da-ge told me everything about you,” said Nie Huaisang quickly. “He loves you very much.”

“It’s a pity that Jue-er isn’t here,” said Fei Yan. “Can you pass him a message for me?”

Nie Huaisang nodded seriously.

“Tell him: ‘Thank you… and I’m sorry.’”

For a second Fei Yan’s figure became sharper, and Nie Huaisang gasped as his mother’s hand became solid against his face. Shen Jiu threw a frantic look at Wei Ying, whose face was scrunched up in concentration.

“I think it’s time,” said Fei Yan suddenly. “Hongyi… I’m sorry that I didn’t listen to you when you told me to take Jue-er and leave, I’m sorry that I wasn’t strong enough… but I can never be sorry for meeting you and Zhuli.”

“A-Fei…” started Nie Hongyi.

“I know,” she said. “Don’t blame yourself. Hongyi, A-Sang, please take care of each other.”

There was no-one in the place where she stood. Tears ran over Nie Huaisang’s face.

“I don’t know what happened,” said Wei Ying faintly. “She just disappeared… I don’t think that she’s here anymore.”

“She moved on,” Shen Jiu concluded. “She will join the circle of reincarnation now.”

He wasn’t sure whether that was what happened, but that felt right to say.

“That can’t be it,” Nie Huaisang said wetly. “Da-ge didn’t get to see her again. I have to bring him, and then you try again…”

“Huaisang, she’s gone,” said Nie Hongyi dully.

“No, no, that’s not fair,” said Nie Huaisang, wiping his tears off with both his sleeves. “Da-ge needs to…”

“Mingjue is strong. He can handle it,” said Nie Hongyi.

Nie Huaisang glared at him with such poison Shen Jiu was impressed. “You think Da-ge can handle everything! Like that saber curse, I’ve heard it all, you know? Does Da-ge know that he is going to qi deviate some day?”

“Of course he knows,” began Nie Hongyi making a step forward. Nie Huaisang stepped back.

“So only I didn’t know. When were you going to tell me that you are going to die? That Da-ge will die too?”

“You weren’t supposed to find out this way. You are too young to understand,” said Nie Hongyi, not coming any closer to his son, who never stopped crying, rubbing at his tears with more and more fury.

“I understand everything!” Nie Huaisang said. “All you care about are sabers and ancestors. You never wanted sons, you wanted heirs to join your stupid cycle of death!”

With these words, Nie Huaisang turned around and ran out of the Ancestral Hall. Nie Hongyi tried to follow him, but Shen Jiu put his arm in front of the man’s chest, stopping him.

“Neither of you is in the state to have a rational conversation. You can talk tomorrow. A-Yao…”

“I’ll make sure that Huaisang is alright,” said Meng Yao. He bowed to Nie Hongyi, who didn’t say anything, and walked after Nie Huaisang quickly.

Shen Jiu was looking at the door when he heard a thump. He rushed to Wei Ying’s side, grabbing his wrist roughly.

“I’m fine. Just felt like lying down,” Wei Ying said.

Shen Jiu ignored the stupidity leaking out of Wei Ying’s mouth as he scanned the boy’s meridians. They seemed to be fine, just qi depleted. It must have taken a lot of power to make

the ghost fully corporeal.

“Mind your limits,” scolded Shen Jiu as he heaved Wei Ying, supporting his weight. “Making the spirit corporeal wasn’t worth it.”

“I don’t know. I think it was worth it if Huaisang got this moment with his mother,” said Wei Ying faintly. Shen Jiu had a feeling that the boy would have to be carried.

“Don’t just sacrifice yourself for other people’s happiness,” Shen Jiu said. As he looked away from the boy, it became apparent that Nie Hongyi had left while he was distracted. Fine. Not like he needed his help anyway.

“If you got hurt, A-Yao would be upset,” added Shen Jiu as they started walking.

Wei Ying laughed faintly. “Yao-ge would be upset.”

“Xue Yang would probably cry,” added Shen Jiu.

“You think so?” asked Wei Ying, amused.

“I… I’ll make you kneel in repentance for a week if you pull something like that again,” said Shen Jiu finally.

“I love you too, Shizun,” said Wei Ying.

Shen Jiu almost dropped him.

Nie Hongyi cleaved the last log in four parts, wiping the sweat off his forehead with his bare forearm. Finally, Taotie had stopped roaring in his head, allowing him to hear his own thoughts.

It was well past morning already, so no use trying to sleep. What was a sleepless night for a cultivator anyway?

He sheathed Taotie, feeling it grumble in response, then went to throw a bucket of cold water over his head. Its chill bite chased some fog out of his head. He watched the piles of firewood as he pressed the water out of his hair. He had to call the servants to put it away before it started raining.

His robes clung to his bare skin as Nie Hongyi threw them back on, not wanting to embarrass any of the servants. They knew better than to enter his courtyard if he showed that he wanted to be left alone, so he’d have to walk to the servant compound to fetch somebody.

The first servant he came across was Lu Wan, Fei Yan’s former maid. He asked her to pass the orders along absent-mindedly before going back to his office. The table was still thrown on the side from the time when he kicked it. Nie Hongyi put it back in place.

Fei Yan hadn’t killed herself.

He still couldn't adjust to the idea. For so many years he had thought that he had driven her to it. He thought that she could feel his withdrawal, his inability to face what had happened and saw it as the lack of love.

Fei Yan was stronger than him. She didn't let what happened break her spirit, while Hongyi… well, it was a wonder that he hadn't gotten a qi deviation yet.

He came close with that crack on Taotie. He suspected that he got it in his fight with Zhuli while she was deviating. She came on so fast, he barely had time to parry before she hit Jue-er. Her blade hit the flat part of Taotie, he remembered that well. In the chaos of everything that had happened, Taotie slowly going out of control almost felt natural.

With the crack fixed, Hongyi thought that it was over. That was wishful thinking on his part, though now Taotie was easier to calm down. Before he would have had to drink himself half to death for it to relent, now it seemed happy enough just to cleave at things. He would push all the pain and anguish inside and…

Could that be it? The secret that kept Nie Hongyi's ancestor from qi deviation. If the saber could fix a faulty cultivation base, it wouldn't be surprising if it could manage other instabilities.

But then why… Well, Zhuli had never been good with emotions. She wouldn't share anything as if it would kill her to show vulnerability. Perhaps she couldn't share her heart demons even with Dilong. And Father… Father wouldn't even cry at Mother's funeral. He had always disparaged Hongyi for being emotional.

He needed to speak to Madam Shen.

At that time of the day she had to be having her morning lessons with Sang-er. If they ended up having it after what had happened that night… though Madam Shen did strike Nie Hongyi as someone who wouldn't let something like that stop her.

He walked to Huaisang's room, bracing himself to face his son. He'd failed him in so many ways, so he couldn't take Sang-er's reaction against him.

Hongyi remembered the days when he couldn't look at Huaisang for too long without feeling that awful knot of hate turn up his throat. He'd hear Sang-er make noise and suddenly he would think "If only you weren't born" and snap at him before locking himself in his office, hiding from terrible thoughts behind paper work.

Sometimes he would break things in a fit of cold fury. He had been afraid that one day he would end up breaking Sang-er, so he avoided him. "Let the nannies care for him" he used to tell Mingjue when he came to him to ask what to do.

It became easier when Huaisang grew. The old wounds scabbed over and it was hard to stay mad at that ridiculous boy, the opposite of everything that the Nie stood for. "Perhaps that's why. Perhaps you will survive us," he had thought once, looking at his youngest pretend to faint to escape from training.

Nie Hongyi threw his son's door open, walking inside with no polite excuse. The information he had was more important than whatever lesson they were having. He blinked at Sang-er standing there with fans in his hand.

Right, he had said something about that to his mother. If that was a private indulgence, he didn't mind it. Hongyi had allowed A-Fan to put female style makeup on him several times. He had thought that he made a rather fetching lady.

"Madam Shen," he started.

"Quiet," the woman said, waving her hand at him. "We are not finished. If you have something to say, wait."

As a Sect Leader, he probably had to put his foot down at being treated like an errand boy. However, Madam Shen was too cute to reprimand seriously. She was like a cat, clawing and hissing at the hand that tried to pet her. So much anger in such a tiny body.

"Now let's try with music," said Madam Shen, ignoring him entirely. Huaisang didn't look at Hongyi as he took an appropriate pose. Madam Shen took a pipa in her hand and started to play a familiar melody.

Huaisang really took after his mother. It was so easy to imagine that she was the one dancing here free like a swallow circling the sky. That was the dance she had performed the day they met.

Just like Hongyi, Zhuli wasn't all that interested in art, but she always respected dancers. She said it required the same skill and precision fighting did, but the dancers got not an ounce of respect fighters did. They used to have a dancing troupe around at every celebration.

It was Jue-er's first birthday celebration. The life had begun to mysteriously return to Zhuli the same way it had suddenly depleted after their son's birth, so Hongyi got the famous dancing swallow to come to commemorate the event.

The tallest of the dancers, Fei Yan was no less graceful for it, moving so swiftly it really did appear that she was weightless. Zhuli had turned to him and whispered, "If you cheated on me with someone like her, I wouldn't be offended."

"Perhaps she prefers the fairer company," had said Hongyi, sending his wife a knowing look.

"If we are lucky she enjoys both," Zhuli had said boldly and drunk wine from his cup. She had always done that, it was so annoying.

He had stolen her cup in revenge, but forgot to drink, stunned by the whirl of Fei Yan's dawn-colored robes.

Sang-er stopped his dance. Hongyi had felt the tears drip down his chin.

"Father?" asked Sang-er, concerned. He forgot all about the lesson, rushing to Hongyi's side. "What happened? Is it Da-ge?"

Hongyi shook his head. “I just didn’t know I had such a talented son. You take after your mother.”

“You liked it?” asked Sang-er, his voice fragile.

“I loved it,” said Hongyi, looking Sang-er in the eye. The boy was always an easy crier. Now his eyes were already welling with tears.

Hongyi remembered all the times when he walked away from Huaisang as the boy swallowed his tears. He told Jue-er to deal with it, but he had always known what he should have done instead.

He wrapped his arms around Huaisang, pressing him into his chest. The boy was really bony.

“I’m sorry, Sang-er,” said Hongyi quietly.

Huaisang didn’t wail or flail, but Hongyi could feel the wet spot growing on his chest in the place where Sang-er’s face touched it.

On Ghost Terminology.

The ghost terminology used in this chapter draws on traditional Chinese beliefs but should be understood as creative adaptation rather than strict representation. Chinese folk religion encompasses diverse and regionally varied traditions with a long and complex history. This work takes inspiration from these beliefs while inventing freely for narrative purposes.

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[1] Soul specters (游魂, yóuhún)
A “soul specter" or “specter” refers to the spirit of a deceased person who has not moved on to the afterlife or reincarnation. Unlike vengeful ghosts (厉鬼, lìguǐ), specters are generally harmless, mere traces of memory rather than conscious entities. They may linger due to attachment to places or people, but lack the resentment necessary to become dangerous. return to text ↩

[2] The Underworld (地狱, Dìyù)
The Chinese underworld, called Dìyù (literally "Earth Prison"), is a complex bureaucratic afterlife realm in Chinese mythology and folk religion. Souls are transported here after death to face judgment for their earthly actions before being assigned to reincarnation. The underworld is conceived as mirroring imperial administration, with judges, clerks, and a hierarchy of officials maintaining cosmic order. To prematurely summon a soul from this realm risks disrupting its journey, potentially condemning it to wander as a hungry ghost. return to text ↩

[3] Heavenly Realm (天界, Tiānjiè)
A celestial plane of existence in Buddhist and Daoist cosmology inhabited by gods, immortals, and beings of great merit. In cultivation fiction, it represents the destination for

cultivators who achieve immortality through orthodox methods and "ascend" beyond the mortal plane. return to text ↩

[4] Yin energy represents darkness, cold, passivity, and the feminine principle, all associated with death and ghosts. Yang energy, by contrast, represents light, warmth, activity, and life. return to text ↩

[5] Name plates, also called ancestral tablets or spirit tablets, are inscribed wooden plaques placed on family altars or in ancestral halls to represent the continuing presence of deceased ancestors. They serve as the physical focal point for ancestral veneration rituals, including offerings of incense, food, and prayers. return to text ↩

Chapter 36: Why do children grow up?

Nie Hongyi had awful taste for interior design. That was the only plausible reason Shen Jiu could think of for why the man always chose this sitting room for their shared meals. The garish shade of green reminded Shen Jiu of vomit, and the bright yellow accents clashed against it.

He seriously considered giving Nie Huaisang an assignment to redecorate this room. The boy had good taste, so he would gleefully reassemble this abomination.

“That marks the first time you asked to break your fast in my company,” said Nie Hongyi, putting his hand on his heart. “I feel truly special.”

“Don’t get used to it,” said Shen Jiu. “You talk too much during mealtime. That’s distracting.”

It brought him back to his early days at Qing Jing. Every move had to be controlled lest somebody noticed that he didn’t belong among the noble scions. He could never relax, especially during mealtimes. That’s why he snapped with the heat of a thousand suns the moment anyone attempted to draw his attention from etiquette with inane conversations.

“I should introduce you to Lan Qiren,” said Nie Hongyi after grabbing a bite of rice. Unlike Shen Jiu, he didn’t seem too preoccupied with manners. “I swear you two will either become the best of friends or the worst of enemies.”

Shen Jiu rolled his eyes and took his own bite of fish, covering his face with his sleeve as he chewed. Eating as a woman was even more convoluted than eating as a man[1]. The difference from his childhood was glaring. There were no sleeves then, no chopsticks, just grubby little hands and sharp teeth ready to protect his meager meal.

Nie Hongyi put down his chopsticks with a clang. “I’ll read the proposal to the elders today. As my advisor, you should come with me, especially considering that a lot of changes to the curriculum were your idea,” he said.

It had been a year since they got the breakthrough on the cause of qi deviations. They couldn’t be certain which exact changes in the Nie culture and lifestyle were to blame. The best idea they could come up with was that it had been a mixture of militaristic culture that looked down on any sort of emotional openness and the weight of the idea that death was coming the moment you stopped fighting.

To alleviate that weight, Shen Jiu offered a change to the disciples’ curriculum that would allow them other avenues than battle. The Nie sect desperately needed medics, purification experts and defense array specialists, so Shen Jiu focused on arranging these particular classes. Nie Huaisang was disappointed there wasn’t an art option, but Shen Jiu didn’t want to teach it himself, and there weren’t any other experts in the sect.

“They won’t take me seriously anyway,” said Shen Jiu. He preferred not to waste his time on people who rebuffed every argument with “you’re an outsider”.

Shen Jiu wanted nothing to do with the elders. He much preferred organizing the inner work of the Impure Realm. That involved a less annoying class of idiot, the type he could shout at and punish if they messed something up. It also didn’t differ too much from running a peak so he knew what to do.

“I actually wanted to discuss something with you,” Shen Jiu said once he was full.

“Is it about the feast?” asked Nie Hongyi. “Mingjue is amusingly invested. He had never insisted on organizing a feast before. I think he’s afraid I will invite the dancers.”

“Nie Mingjue has more sense than you do,” said Shen Jiu. After he became more involved in the inner workings of the Impure Realm, this became only more apparent. Nie Hongyi wasn’t a bad politician, but as an administrator he lacked sense.

“If Yue Yao was a girl, I would have suggested betrothing them,” said Nie Hongyi out of nowhere. Shen Jiu could feel his mouth hang open in silent indignation.

Who just said things like that out loud?

Shen Jiu sputtered. “Where is that coming from?”

“I’ve given up on distracting my son from his duties long enough for him to notice that women exist. I would arrange a marriage for him, but to do that I want him to at least get along with the girl.”

“Have you considered that you shouldn’t get involved in your son’s love life?” asked Shen Jiu coldly. “I don’t know why we are even discussing this. I came to ask you for a favor.”

“That’s rare,” said Nie Hongyi. “My sect owes you a lot so feel free to ask.”

“I want to give A-Yao a courtesy name[2],” said Shen Jiu, looking at his hands. “I don’t have enough status for that but you do, so that would be… I would appreciate it if you did it for me.”

“Oh, of course, that’s something I should have thought of!” Nie Hongyi said. “We don’t really have courtesy names, so I haven’t thought of that. Of course your boy needs a courtesy name!”

Historically, it had taken the Nie some time to gain enough status to be allowed their own courtesy names. Either to compensate for that or to make fun of the elites, they began giving their children longer, more poetic names that sounded like courtesy names. Shen Jiu found this tradition endearing.

“So just tell me what name I should give the young Yue Yao and I’ll do it,” Nie Hongyi said awkwardly as he finished his tangent.

“I haven’t chosen yet,” Shen Jiu said. “It’s too important.”

“Well, you need to think fast. There’s not much time left,” Nie Hongyi said. He was right. The feast was in the evening.

“I know,” hissed Shen Jiu.

“What do you want for your son’s future?” asked Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu said, “Everything. Long life, prosperity, happiness. But that’s too… unoriginal.”

“Perhaps who you want him to become?” suggested Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu thought of Jin Guangyao, looking with hope-filled eyes at the father who would never treat him as worthy, no matter the sacrifices he made. “I want him to have a clear view of people around him. To treat the others the same way they treat him.”

Nie Hongyi became thoughtful. “Hm… Perhaps Jianzhuo? Yue Jianzhuo rolls off the tongue well.”

Shen Jiu could almost hear the echo of that awful man’s name[3].

“No.” The words felt like bile as they came out. “Not that.”

Nie Hongyi frowned. “I’m not a poetic sort like you… You can think more on it. Just let me know before the feast.”

Shen Jiu nodded stiffly. He let Nie Hongyi talk about the feast a bit more before leaving. He could never understand this fascination with festivities.

The snow cracked under Shen Jiu’s feet as he walked to the training pit. He stopped to instruct the passing disciples to clean the path. It was unbecoming for a major sect to be covered in snow, no matter how heavy the previous night’s snowfall had been.

The disciples bowed deeply. He didn’t expect the position of advisor to gain him such respect. Even as a Peak Head he had only received such respect on his own peak and there always was the unmistakable trace of fear in every hasty bow. There was no fear with the Nie, and that left Shen Jiu almost wrong-footed.

When Shen Jiu approached the pit, Nie Huaisang was lying on his back with his arms askew and his saber a few feet away. Nie Mingjue stood over him with his arms crossed and his face stony.

He had seen that happen before. Nie Huaisang would train in good faith for a little while, but then he would fall down ‘by accident’ and refuse to stand up.

“Nie Huaisang, are you practicing being killed in your first fight?” called Shen Jiu, not bothering to jump into the pit.

“Yes!” screamed Nie Huaisang, not standing up. Nie Mingjue swore under his breath and lifted the boy by the scruff of his robes. The sight of Nie Huaisang hanging limply from his brother’s grip made Shen Jiu snort.

“You are already good at that! Get your ass up for your morning lessons!” Shen Jiu’s words came out so warm, they surprised even himself.

Once they had figured out that the Nie needed to maintain a relationship with their sabers to stay alive, Nie Huaisang could no longer avoid it. Only recently had he reached the stage that allowed him to practice with his own saber.

Some people laughed at Nie Huaisang’s dramatics. One bold disciple dared to wave to Shen Jiu as if he were the kind of person one could wave at. He was going to shout at Nie Huaisang to hurry up when the pit demon jumped out at him.

“I get to train with a sword now!” announced Xue Yang proudly. Fortunately, the sword was wooden, so Shen Jiu didn’t get stabbed when the brat poked him with it.

Shen Jiu grabbed the sword, tearing it out of the child’s hands, and raised it over his head the moment Xue Yang tried to get it back. The brat didn’t give up, jumping around him in futile attempts to get back his weapon.

“Give it back!” he yapped, too short to reach the sword.

“If you don’t respect your weapon, you shouldn’t be wielding it,” said Shen Jiu.

“Xue Yang! How long do I have to wait for you?” hollered Nie Lieyan from the pit.

“She stole my sword!” the brat screamed.

“Then get it back!”

“I’m trying!”

Shen Jiu contained a smile. He wasn’t going to smile at anything Nie Lieyan did, even if the man had proven to be not entirely awful as a teacher for Xue Yang.

“Go fetch,” ordered Shen Jiu, throwing the sword as far as he could without accidentally hitting someone.

“Hag,” grumbled Xue Yang before rushing after the wooden weapon. That was clearly the result of Meng Yao’s hard work, the boy had been much more crass in his insults before.

It would be a while before Xue Yang would grow old enough to leave, Shen Jiu thought suddenly. Oddly enough that made him feel relieved.

Nie Huaisang climbed the wooden steps out of the pit slowly, rubbing his upper arm with a wince.

“Everything hurts, Master Shen, can I get a day off?” he asked pathetically.

“You can hold a brush, can’t you?” said Shen Jiu, unsympathetic.

“I’m not sure I can… Please tell my brother that I can’t train three mornings a week, one is enough,” said Nie Huaisang.

In all honesty, Shen Jiu would prefer it if the boy chose to abandon the Nie way of cultivation. However, his foundation was already crooked. In Nie Huaisang’s place, Shen Jiu wouldn’t forgive Nie Hongyi that easily for putting him on that path.

Before Shen Jiu could answer, Nie Mingjue boomed, “Huaisang! We spoke of this. You need to bond with Fuxi properly, after that do whatever you want.”

“If Fuxi is anything like me, he doesn’t want to hack at the air all day,” said Nie Huaisang. “If I clean him and polish him, he should be fine.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” sputtered Nie Mingjue.

“Next time get him a slab of wood,” Shen Jiu suggested. “Let him make a statue out of it with his saber. That’s artistic enough.”

“Master Shen,” whined Nie Huaisang. “You know I can’t cut through wood cleanly. It will be a mess!”

Shen Jiu shrugged. “Then practice. Now let’s go. You’ve wasted enough of my time already.”

Nie Huaisang pouted at him.

“We need to go to the forest,” said Shen Jiu as they walked away from the pit.

Nie Huaisang tensed immediately. “What for?” he asked, trying not to betray his anxiety. Nie Huaisang was good at masking his emotions with big and dramatic outbursts, but when he tried to appear nonchalant, he was rather easy to read.

“I want to teach you something,” said Shen Jiu as calmly as he could.

Shen Jiu was no stranger to children being afraid of him. In fact, he used to relish that fear. If they were afraid they wouldn’t dare lash out even if they grew stronger, they wouldn’t dare to go against his will even if he couldn’t explain why he didn’t want them close. Fear was strength and strength was safety.

Still, he didn’t want Nie Huaisang to be afraid of him.

“Teach me what?” the boy asked, playing with his sleeves nervously. He made his weakness so apparent, Shen Jiu had to resist the urge to slap his hands away.

Shen Jiu sighed. “You’ll like it. I… promise.”

Nie Huaisang didn’t seem convinced, but he still followed Shen Jiu out of the Impure Realm into the familiar pine grove. The way the boy’s lips were pressed together, refusing to wobble, made Shen Jiu feel something dangerously close to affection.

“What I’m going to share with you is the cultivation technique of my own making. It is also a part of your own legacy,” began Shen Jiu.

Nie Huaisang’s shoulders relaxed slightly. “How is this possible?”

“When the spirit of your ancestors mentioned Nie Ruo making metal figures move, I was reminded of my own technique. I also made it when I had no official cultivation training, so I assume the mechanisms would be similar.”

“Like that ribbon, you made it move on its own,” recalled Nie Huaisang. “And sometimes when you duel you make the sand surround people. You infuse your qi into objects, right?”

The boy could pretend to be an air-head all he wanted, but he noticed things.

Shen Jiu nodded. “This technique is well-suited for people with low qi reserves or an unorthodox cultivation base. As both are correct for you, I assume that you’ll pick it up quickly. Do you remember what makes your way of cultivation different from the orthodox one?”

Shen Jiu had in fact given multiple lectures on this topic after they had a firmer grasp of how it all worked. Nie Hongyi wanted to make sure that all the Nie cultivators were informed. The elders found it outrageous that an outsider was lecturing the Nie on their own cultivation method.

“We condense qi unevenly and lose it more quickly?” asked Nie Huaisang. “Because we have a less stiff grasp on the qi, it makes it easier for the sabers to make a connection. Then the saber regulates the qi flow, preventing instabilities. Unless something stops it from doing its job… At least that’s the theory.”

Shen Jiu nodded. “That also makes it easier for you to infuse objects with your qi. And because of your lower reserves, there is less danger that you will overflow the object and make it blow up.”

It took Wei Ying hundreds of attempts before he had stopped blowing the things up. By the end of it Shen Jiu began to suspect that the boy was doing it on purpose.

“Things can blow up?” asked Nie Huaisang, appalled.

“Not in your case,” lied Shen Jiu. “You are not strong enough. Now listen to me carefully…”

He explained in detail how to channel the qi into an object and how to manipulate it, then tore several pine needles and put them on his open palm. “Channel qi in one of them and try to lift it.”

Nie Huaisang frowned as he looked at the needles. It didn’t take long for one of them to twitch. “Don’t let it go. Maintain the connection,” said Shen Jiu.

The needle jumped off his palm before falling right back into it. “Again.”

One more jump, this one lower. “Again.”

Slowly the needle rose off his palm and floated in the air. It fell down soon after, but Shen Jiu was pleased nevertheless. He knew that Nie Huaisang would pick up on it quickly, just like Jiang Yanli did.

“Good,” he said. “Practice this regularly and soon you’ll be able to do that.” He made the other three needles fly off his palm and circle Nie Huaisang several times before stabbing themselves into the tree as if they were made of metal.

Many people could put their qi into objects, but Shen Jiu never met a person who could command as many objects at the same time as he did. This demonstration would be far more impressive in the summer. Even Liu Qingge was taken aback by his petals once, their sharp edges going through the weak qi barrier he had put up over his skin.

“I’m not sure that’s something I need,” said Nie Huaisang, shuddering at the demonstration.

“You need self-defence more than anyone,” scoffed Shen Jiu. “And you can use it in other areas of life. It can even be used in painting. If you are skilled enough, you can embed qi into paint and make it dry faster or keep it from smudging.”

That made Nie Huaisang’s eyes shine with interest. This boy was so predictable.

Now Shen Jiu and Nie Hongyi were even. He had given Nie Huaisang his own technique to protect himself with and now Nie Hongyi would give Meng Yao a proper courtesy name that would make the gentry treat him as an equal. All that was left was to think of a name.

After his lesson with Nie Huaisang was over, Shen Jiu went to his rooms to think on a name that would properly express all his wishes and expectations.

Deep inside he knew that his only wish was for Meng Yao to stay a child forever, safe and sound under his guidance. But that wasn’t the future that was possible.

So he went through all kinds of combinations, some taken from poems, some his own creations. He spoke of brilliance, of radiance, of softness hiding metal. Nothing sounded right.

Shen Jiu wished he could give Meng Yao a part of himself to carry. Something that would connect them other than the shared blood that didn’t even belong to Shen Jiu. He didn’t even mind if nobody but him would know the connection.

A thought occurred to him. Yes, that would do.

Shen Jiu whispered his decision to Nie Hongyi right before the feast began.

“Yue Yao,” began Nie Hongyi, rising from his place. The hall quietened to listen to him, his voice carrying easily. “You might not be a Nie disciple, but after a year here you became one of us. You didn’t need to work to pay your keep and still you worked hard, helping whenever you could.”

Nie Hongyi raised a cup in the air and the hall mirrored him. “Today you become a man. You were young when you lived through the tragedy of your father’s death. Despite it, you did

your best to give your mother all the support she needed."

For a moment Meng Yao met Shen Jiu's eyes and smiled. Shen Jiu forced himself to smile back. It was Meng Yao's day, so he would be happy for him.

Nie Hongyi continued, "Today I bestow you with the name Qingming[4]. Carry it with pride!"

Meng Yao's smile widened with genuine happiness. At least he seemed to like the name.

There wasn't much Shen Jiu could give him. He had little that was earned by his own merit, and whatever he had was left in his past life. However, he had earned his generational name with hard work alone. It wasn't something that could usually be passed along from parent to child, but Shen Jiu wanted to give it to Meng Yao so he did.

Everybody drank from their cups.

There were more toasts after that. Obviously, Shen Jiu had to give one as the boy's mother. He had prepared for that.

"As your mother and your teacher, I am proud of the young man you grew up to be," said Shen Jiu, keeping his voice even. "Now I want the whole world to see what an exemplary cultivator you are."

The words were pretty but that didn't make them any less true. Shen Jiu did want Meng Yao to take the world by storm, putting in motion whatever grand plans he seemed to always be making in his head.

Wine tasted bitter on Shen Jiu's lips as he finished his toast. He hoped Meng Yao couldn't notice anything.

Nie Mingjue was the last to speak. Shen Jiu was surprised to see a fond expression on the young man's face as he addressed Meng Yao. The only other person he looked at with this expression was Nie Huaisang.

"This year I have been glad to have you as my brother in arms and as… my friend," Nie Mingjue spoke stiffly. "Wherever your path might take you, I want you to know that you'll always have a place in the Impure Realm."

Shen Jiu wondered whether Meng Yao would choose to stay in the Impure Realm even if Shen Jiu decided to leave. He didn't want to test that.

During the ceremony Meng Yao seemed almost… popular. The disciples met every toast with such joy that it couldn't be only the pleasure of a feast. And then after the formal part was over, Meng Yao was quickly surrounded with well-wishers, eager to clap him on the shoulder and say their own words of encouragement.

Could the Impure Realm have become Meng Yao's home in one year? It certainly looked like that.

"When did he become so popular?" asked Shen Jiu quietly, mostly talking to himself.

“That’s a magic of shared night-hunts,” said Nie Hongyi with nostalgia. “The rush of a shared kill, the trust of a covered back, the warmth of the shared meal around the fire. That forges bonds fast.”

“Truthfully?” asked Shen Jiu. For him it had never seemed to work. The shared night-hunts had only caused more strife. He could still remember the sting of Liu Qingge’s words. He had protected the man’s back and all he got in return were accusations.

“There’s also the fact that he’s your son,” added Nie Hongyi as an afterthought.

Shen Jiu looked at him, seeking the signs of unfortunate joke. There were none. “And?” he asked crossly.

“You’re well-liked and so is he,” explained Nie Hongyi.

“Since when am I well-liked?” asked Shen Jiu, narrowing his eyes.

He had never been well-liked in his life and he didn’t want to be.

“Since you’ve solved the saber curse,” explained Nie Hongyi. “Haven’t you noticed?”

“I wasn’t the one who solved it,” huffed Shen Jiu. He had attributed the disciple’s behavior to his new position. Perhaps he was wrong.

“We still wouldn’t have done it without you. You… You probably don’t understand how much that meant for the Nie,” said Nie Hongyi. “For the first time in our lives, we can see… hope. The road isn’t predetermined anymore. That’s… you know I haven’t felt this light in years.”

When he put it like that, Shen Jiu could almost understand. He took a heavy swing out of his cup. Well-liked, huh? That was new.

He drank a lot that night. He had a full cup at every toast, and then kept refilling his cup as he watched Meng Yao across the room with bitter melancholy.

Short and thin, even with cultivation his body didn’t take the alcohol as easily as his old one used to. Soon his movements became choppy and he felt the numbness, the impenetrable wall that separated him from the world.

“Are you sure you need to have a refill?” asked Nie Hongyi worriedly as Shen Jiu was pouring his fifteenth cup. Hah! Fifteen, the age when children outgrew their parents.

“You are the one lecturing me?” asked Shen Jiu indignantly.

What right did this drunk have to lecture him? No right at all! So fuck him.

“It’s just… I know that you are not used to it. You will feel it tomorrow.”

As if he had never felt shitty. He used to feel shitty almost every day. He could live with a damn hangover.

“Who cares,” said Shen Jiu, watching as the wine spilled over the rim of his cup onto the table. That wasn’t good. He took a drink.

“I think it’s time for us to retire. Let the young ones enjoy themselves without their parents watching,” said Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu hummed. Yes, Meng Yao didn’t need his mother anymore.

Nie Hongyi dragged him up by the elbow and toward the exit. Shen Jiu could feel his feet wobble. That wasn’t ideal.

“I need to say good night to A-Yao before we leave,” complained Shen Jiu in the hallway.

Nie Hongyi shook his head. “We’ve done it already. Don’t you remember?”

Shen Jiu was never going to drink again. That felt awful.

“Why do the children grow up?” asked Shen Jiu as he was being led through the hallways by the arm. “Why can’t they just always stay small and cute and looking at you as if you are the center of their world?”

“I don’t know. That’s just time I guess. We grow old, children grow up.”

“That’s not fair!” huffed Shen Jiu.

“How did you even get so drunk?” asked Nie Hongyi, impressed. “I’ve never seen you drunk before.”

“I’m small,” explained Shen Jiu with a huff.

He could feel the rumble of Nie Hongyi’s laughter through their connected arms. “I can see that,” he said.

“I used to be tall,” complained Shen Jiu. “I miss being tall. Now my neck hurts when I have to talk to people.”

That set Nie Hongyi off again. “What even were you drinking?”

“Your shit wine,” huffed Shen Jiu. “Remind me to change the importer.”

“I have a feeling we won’t be talking of this conversation ever again, or you’ll kill me.”

It occurred to Shen Jiu that he was with a man, being taken somewhere. Alone. At night. And he was drunk. How did he get there?

“Are you going to fuck me?” asked Shen Jiu.

Nie Hongyi stopped. “I’m taking you to your room. To sleep.”

“He would make me drink wine sometimes,” recalled Shen Jiu, the alcohol wrapping the sharp shard of his memories in silk. “So I would be pliant. I think I threw up on the bastard

once.”

Shen Jiu grinned at the memory. “That’s what he broke my nose for. Stupid bastard. What did he expect would even happen?”

“Who was it?” asked Nie Hongyi, his voice tense. Why were they just standing in the hallway? Did Shen Jiu need to ask something?

“Huh?”

“The man who broke your nose?” asked Nie Hongyi.

“Which one?” asked Shen Jiu. Why were they speaking of broken noses all of a sudden.

“Just… know that if you need me to break some bones for you I’ll be happy to,” said Nie Hongyi.

Shen Jiu nodded. That was very helpful.

“Where is Yue Qi?” he asked. “I’ve always wanted to break that apologetic face of his, but I would feel bad. He is like a sad dog, you can kick him but he will just whine and you’ll feel like you are a terrible person. I am a terrible person, but I don’t want to feel like a terrible person, you know?”

“Okay, Shen-mei[5]. We are here,” said Nie Hongyi. “And you aren’t a terrible person.”

“Where are we?” asked Shen Jiu suspiciously.

“That’s your room,” said Nie Hongyi. “Now drink some water before you go to bed.”

Shen Jiu complied. He couldn’t remember lying down, but he could feel a blanket being draped over him.

Their old ratty blanket. They had grown too big for it to cover both of them so they would always fight for who would get it. Whenever Shen Jiu won the fight and got Yue Qi to take the damn blanket, he would feel it being draped over him as he was falling asleep.

Yue Qi had always been a liar. Shen Jiu loved him despite it.

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[1] Traditional Chinese dining etiquette prescribed different behaviors for men and women, particularly in formal settings. Women were expected to eat more delicately, take smaller bites, cover their mouths when chewing (using sleeves or a hand), and never reach across the table. return to text ↩

[2] A courtesy name is a formal name bestowed upon reaching adulthood (in MDZS at 15), marking the transition from child to a full member of society. The courtesy name is how one is known to peers and in formal contexts, and also a marker of belonging to social elites.

Traditionally, a courtesy name was bestowed by a respected elder: usually a father, grandfather, or sect leader. Women did not have the social standing to perform this rite, especially not women with unknown backgrounds like Shen Shi. return to text ↩

[3] The name Jianzhuo (鉴浊) combines "mirror" (jian) and "muddy" (zhuo), suggesting someone who sees clearly through murkiness. But for Shen Jiu, it sounds too close to Qiu Jianluo (秋剪罗), which is written with different characters. return to text ↩

[4] Qingming (清鉴) combines two characters:
* Qing (清): clear, pure, distinct. It's also the generational character of Shen Jiu's Cang Qiong generation of Peak Lords.
* Ming (鉴): mirror, to reflect, to examine (same character as the jian in Jianzhuo, but here pronounced ming in this compound)

The name means "clear mirror" or "pure reflection", someone who sees clearly, whose vision is unclouded by prejudice or emotion, who reflects truth without distortion.

Qingming is a homophone to the Qingming Festival (清明节), a spring holiday for honoring ancestors: cleaning graves, making offerings, remembering the dead. return to text ↩

[5] Shen-mei combines Shen Jiu's family name with mei (妹), meaning "younger sister." It's an affectionate, slightly teasing form of address. Something an older brother figure might call a younger woman. return to text ↩

How does the Nie cultivation style actually work?

The details have been sprinkled over a lot of chapters and I didn't want to summarise it all in the chapter itself, because that would be just a giant chunk of exposition. So I will do it here with all the details and some facts that Shen Jiu and Nie Hongyi will never fully understand.

Before I start rolling, I just want to let everyone know that this information is not necessary for understanding any of the future chapters (if something becomes important to the plot I'll explain again in the chapter).

Let's begin with the *foundation*.

Most cultivation sects teach disciples to build a stable, balanced foundation. Energy is condensed evenly, circulation follows established paths, and the goal is harmony between body, spirit, and the natural world.

The Nie method, by contrast, teaches disciples to cultivate an unstable foundation. Energy is condensed unevenly. Circulation is aggressive rather than harmonious. The resulting foundation is "crooked", functional for generating power, but inherently prone to instability and deviation. Also, it is the kind of foundation Shen Jiu had in canon.

Now the *sabers*.

The instability of the Nie foundation serves a specific purpose: it makes the cultivator receptive to the saber bond.

Nie sabers are not ordinary spiritual weapons. They contain the living cores of spiritual beasts, harvested while the beast was alive and bound into the blade through a bloody, violent forging process. These cores retain a form of consciousness.

When the bond forms, the saber's core essentially rewires the cultivator's foundation. It takes over regulation of energy flow, smoothing out the intentional instabilities and creating a new, stable system. This is why Nie cultivators who have successfully bonded with their sabers appear to have normal cultivation when examined.

So why do the qi deviations happen?

The Nie had learned to expect that their sabers hunger for blood. The more blood they are fed, the more violence they demand. This is a misconception.

The saber's "hunger" is not a demand for blood or combat. The saber is trying to help. When the wielder's emotional state becomes unstable (when grief, guilt, anger, or fear begin to accumulate) the saber senses this and reaches out. It asks the wielder to let it in and share the burden.

But the Nie have learned, over generations, to interpret this reaching-out as a demand for violence. Their militaristic culture teaches that emotion is weakness, that stoicism is strength, that the way to quiet a restless saber is to give it blood. So they go on night hunts.

For some cultivators, this almost worked. The physical release of combat can vent pent-up emotions after all.

But for emotions like grief or depression, night hunting does nothing. The saber keeps reaching out, and the wielder keeps misunderstanding. The saber's "screaming" becomes more desperate. The wielder's instability worsens. Eventually, a qi deviation happens.

Why didn't the Nie have qi deviations in the past?

There are actually three main factors.

The first one is toxic warrior culture. Stoicism, emotional repression and lack of emotional honesty don’t allow many of the Nie to fully connect with their saber.

Next comes the generational trauma. Every qi deviation leaves a new scar. Every single Nie lost somebody to this curse and that shapes them.

And after that comes hopelessness. They think that there is only one way forward: either you fight or you die. Every Nie had lived with a death sentence before they found another way.

Chapter 37: Fair and square.

Waves of nausea hit Shen Jiu before he even opened his eyes. His head was heavy, his temples throbbing with a dull, persistent ache. He would have thought he'd had a qi deviation if he didn't remember the disgusting wine. The memory of its taste alone brought bile to his throat.

He couldn't blame anyone but himself. He'd kept drinking past his limit and very likely would have kept going if Nie Hongyi hadn't stopped him. The thought of losing control like that, of being that vulnerable, made him sicker still. He turned his head carefully. The room tilted like a boat on rough water. And then he saw Meng Yao.

“You’re awake? How are you feeling?” asked Meng Yao in that fussy way of his Shen Jiu had always found equal part endearing and annoying. “Do you want some water?”

“What are you doing here?” asked Shen Jiu, his voice coarse. He took the cup anyway, draining it in one long swallow.

The blanket was stifling him so he threw it off. He was still wearing five layers of his best silk robes. He had no idea how that happened. Shen Jiu only hoped that he hadn’t damaged the embroidery. It had been expensive to make.

“I brought you some congee with century eggs[1],” explained Meng Yao, setting the bowl next to the bed. “Shixiong said that it helps his father after he’s overindulged.”

Shen Jiu imagined Meng Yao, going around early in the morning and asking around about hangover cures. ‘Of course,’ Nie Mingjue must have thought, ‘That Shen Shi surely needs the help with her hangover after the spectacle she had made of herself.’

Shame made him feel hot and heat made him all the more nauseous. Shen Jiu pushed himself higher on the bed, willing the room to stop wavering.

“What, am I a drunk now?” he asked, rubbing at the bridge of his nose. “And you had nothing better to do this morning than pester Nie Mingjue about hangover cures?”

“Mother,” said Meng Yao with a sigh. “It’s noon.”

Was it? Shen Jiu couldn't remember the last time he'd slept this late. The sun was too high, the light too sharp. He cursed whoever had decided to put windows in this room.

“I knew that,” he lied, crossing his arms.

"Of course." Meng Yao's smile was infuriatingly serene.

“You think now that you’re all grown up, you can look down on your mother?” asked Shen Jiu. This was what he got for breaking his back raising this child.

“Just have some congee,” said Meng Yao, persistent like a burr. “I made it myself.” He handed Shen Jiu the bowl, the smell making his stomach churn.

"Did I ask you to?" Shen Jiu grumbled, but his hand was already reaching for the bowl. If it helped Nie Hongyi's hangovers, it would help his.

Wait.

Nie Hongyi had walked him to his room last night, hadn't he? Shen Jiu could remember somebody putting a blanket over him. He had to have been out of his mind with alcohol if he walked off with a man and allowed him inside his room.

But nothing had happened.

And strangely, he wasn't surprised.

He wondered whether he did or said anything strange while drunk.

Shen Jiu couldn’t remember no matter how much he tried. He shook his head and took a bite of the congee.

"It's good," he admitted. The first bite reminded him he was ravenous. He ate quickly, without pretense. Meng Yao had seen worse.

Meng Yao waited until the bowl was empty then took it away, freeing Shen Jiu’s hands. “Did something happen yesterday?” asked Meng Yao gently.

“It was my only son’s fifteenth birthday,” said Shen Jiu, his voice flat. “Did I not have a reason to celebrate?”

Meng Yao’s eyes narrowed. “Was it truly celebration?”

This boy just never could let anything go. Shen Jiu groaned. “Perhaps I felt morose. It's not a crime. And it was the last time I drank, anyway.”

Meng Yao took his hand.

Shen Jiu tensed on instinct but Meng Yao's touch was warm and familiar. He let himself relax.

“I will never forget about you,” said Meng Yao. “Even when I get married and have my own children, I will always find the time for you.”

He squeezed Shen Jiu's hand.

“Isn’t it my duty to take care of my mother? You took care of me. Now it’s my turn.”

Meng Yao had always been trying to take care of him even when he was a brat no older than seven. What a ridiculous child.

Shen Jiu turned away, cheeks warm.

“Have you finally come to your senses and decided to marry a woman?” Shen Jiu asked.

He regretted saying that immediately. That was too harsh.

“We will adopt,” said Meng Yao with such certainty that Shen Jiu turned to him, incredulous. “There is no shortage of orphans on the streets.”

“Does Nie Mingjue know about this?” The question came out like an accusation. Had he missed something? The thought of his son with a man filled him with dread. He was too young, his heart too fragile. He would get hurt inevitably.

“He doesn’t even know that I like him,” said Meng Yao with a pout. “It’s… I’ve written him a poem. He said that it sounded good, but I know he didn’t understand it at all. So I tried to be more down to earth. I make him food now, but… I don’t think he understands why I do it.”

If his son had to like a man Shen Jiu was glad that it was someone this dense. At this rate he had nothing to worry about.

“Mother…” asked Meng Yao suddenly. “How do you know whether a person likes you?”

Shen Jiu had no idea what made Meng Yao think he could help.

“All men are lecherous, so their eyes wander when they are interested and their hands linger,” explained Shen Jiu. “If he touches you often, do not stay alone with him. He will demand more and that will hurt.”

Meng Yao stared at him silently. “Shixiong wouldn’t…” He shook his head. “I have never seen him look at anyone like that. And he touches me the same way he touches Huaisang.”

“All men are like that. Some are just discreet enough not to get caught,” said Shen Jiu with conviction. Then he looked at Meng Yao and felt doubt. “Most men are like that,” he corrected.

Yue Qingyuan had disappointed him in many ways, but never in this one.

Neither had his lookalike, Jiang Fengmian… he never touched without permission.

And Nie Hongyi had walked him to his room last night, put a blanket over him, and done nothing else.

“Do you think I should tell him?” asked Meng Yao.

Shen Jiu sputtered. “Are you insane? Even if he likes you, don’t let him know. Let him work for it!”

Shen Jiu might not have any experience, but he had read enough books to know. Meng Yao didn’t seem convinced.

Shen Jiu didn't leave his room the rest of the day. His feet were unsteady, his head still tender, but that wasn't the only reason. He wasn't ready to face Nie Hongyi. He still couldn't remember if he said anything strange or worse, anything incriminating.

The next day, however, he was summoned to Nie Hongyi's office, so there was no running away from it. To Shen Jiu's surprise, Nie Hongyi didn't say anything about his inebriated behaviour.

"We have a delegation from Yueyang Chang sect coming next week," said Nie Hongyi. "Can you do me a favor and skip the welcoming feast?"

Shen Jiu was so startled to hear the name Chang that it took him a moment to comprehend what Nie Hongyi was asking of him.

"And can I ask why?" asked Shen Jiu. Did Nie Hongyi think he had a drinking issue now? Or was he embarrassed to have a female advisor?

"I would like not to punch Chang Ci'an in the face before the negotiation even started. He's a handsy drunk and had been known to make certain comments about women."

Shen Jiu winced. And he thought he could not think any lower of that man.

"And what do you want to negotiate? Or should I skip negotiation as well?"

"He is more reasonable when he is sober, so it should be fine. As you know, the banditry in Yueyang has been disrupting trade with Qinghe. I want to negotiate for our disciples to be allowed to patrol in Yueyang."

"Yueyang Chang won't agree," said Shen Jiu.

"I'll make them agree," said Nie Hongyi with confidence. "If they cannot protect their own territory, that's only natural for Qinghe to get involved."

Shen Jiu could respect this attitude. He, however, had other things to worry about.

Shen Jiu didn't trust himself to deal with Xue Yang effectively, so he called a family meeting, informing Wei Ying and Meng Yao beforehand.

For some reason, Meng Yao insisted on bringing food. Shen Jiu didn't understand how that was supposed to help but he would never say no to his lawful share of sweets.

"It's been a while since we spent time all together like this," said Wei Ying. He had a lot of nasty words to say about Chang Ci'an when Shen Jiu had informed him. But now he was perfectly cheerful.

"Are you dying?" asked Xue Yang, looking at Shen Jiu with dark wide eyes. He already had a sweet bun in his hand.

"A-Yang, why would you ask that?" asked Meng Yao fussily.

"What now? I can't ask her if she is pregnant, I can't ask her if she is dying… If she's so sensitive she shouldn't talk to people."

"Speak in that tone and you'll be the one dying," said Shen Jiu.

Xue Yang blew a raspberry at him. The gall of that brat!

“There’s a delegation from another sect coming soon, A-Yang,” began Meng Yao softly. Shen Jiu couldn’t understand why he would beat around the bush like that, but he had to admit that Meng Yao was better with people so he probably knew better.

“Do you want me not to talk to them?” asked Xue Yang immediately.

“It would be better for you if you didn’t. This sect… it’s Yueyang Chang,” said Meng Yao apologetically.

Xue Yang was up in a flash. “They can’t come here! Tell old man Nie that if that bastard comes here I’ll kill him! I’ll gut him, and behead him, and piss on his corpse!”

Shen Jiu had heard and said much worse but his eldest seemed to be out of their depth, looking at Xue Yang helplessly. Shen Jiu decided that it couldn’t cause too much harm if he got involved.

“You’re still weak. Chang Ci’an is an adult cultivator. He will demolish you in a fight. Train hard and when you grow up, you can kill him.”

Xue Yang didn’t seem to be in a logical mood. “I don’t care! He can’t come here and leave alive, he can’t. I want him dead! Dead! Don’t you remember what he did to me?”

He raised the hand with the missing pinky, pushing it to their faces. Shen Jiu noticed Wei Ying clench his fists.

Meanwhile, Meng Yao didn’t react at all. “With a delegation coming, the only thing we can do is avoid him, A-Yang. We can't do anything against him yet.”

“You can, you just don’t want to!” screamed Xue Yang, his face wet with tears, and ran out of the room.

Wei Ying’s face darkened. “Are you sure we can’t just kill the bastard?” he asked.

“It won’t help A-Yang if we get arrested,” said Meng Yao. “Our connections are just enough to save us from execution.”

“Damn it… I’ll make sure A-Yang is fine,” said Wei Ying and walked out of the room. When it came to tears, Wei Ying was probably the best person to get involved. He knew how to cheer people up.

“That could have gone better,” said Meng Yao with a sigh. He gave the remaining pastries on the table a sort of dejected look.

“He would have to face the injustice of this world sooner or later,” said Shen Jiu with a shrug. “Men in power can get away with anything. Xue Yang was lucky to survive.”

“Perhaps we could speak to Sect Leader Nie or Shixiong about it. They are righteous people,” said Meng Yao, playing with his fingers. He had a sort of pained expression on his face that Shen Jiu didn’t know how to interpret.

“Righteous or not, they still have to take care of their sect first. Getting involved would bring them too much trouble,” said Shen Jiu. Meng Yao didn’t argue.

Despite his own words, Shen Jiu debated coming to Nie Hongyi with this. The whole situation left a bad taste in his mouth and he hoped that Nie Hongyi would share his outrage.

But the older, more experienced part of Shen Jiu told him it would change nothing.

Nie Hongyi couldn’t take another sect leader to justice based on the words of a single child. And even if they could prove it… Refusing to pay a street rat wasn’t a crime, neither was trampling one with a cart “on accident”. The Nie also needed to negotiate the trade routes’ safety and making a fuss about Xue Yang would just get in the way.

The best Shen Jiu could do was make sure that Yueyang Chang lost the negotiation, so he prepared accordingly. It wouldn’t be justice, but still better than nothing.

Chang Ci’an didn’t look like a monster. In fact, like most cultivators he was good-looking and his manner wasn’t uncouth. He even bowed to Shen Jiu upon being introduced and said that it was an honor to meet a woman Nie Hongyi spoke so highly of.

Most monsters didn’t look like monsters.

They could be model citizens to those on their own level, but leave them alone with a servant and you would see their true face. Qiu Jianluo was a good-looking and well-regarded young man. He treated his sister so well she could never conceive what her brother was like behind closed doors. Shen Jiu imagined that Chang Ci’an was the same way.

Shen Jiu took his place at the negotiation table. It was between Nie Hongyi and Nie Lieyan, facing Chang Ci’an directly. He would prefer to sit with Meng Yao, who was asked to take notes during the meeting, but staying by Nie Hongyi would give him more political capital.

“Thank you for agreeing to come here on such short notice,” said Nie Hongyi sincerely. “I know that your sect is currently stretched thin.”

Chang Ci’an nodded. Something about it struck Shen Jiu as self-important. “How could I refuse after you made such a generous offer? I’m afraid, however, that it’s unneeded.”

“Unneeded?” asked Nie Mingjue. He was only eighteen but with his size and serious face he looked at least five years older than that. “In the last half a year more than fifty caravans were robbed. Some of these merchants lost their livelihood, some even lost their lives. One village on our border almost starved this winter, because they couldn't get their provisions. How do you explain that, Sect Leader Chang?”

Chang Ci'an laughed nervously. "But you see, Young Master Nie, they only were targeted because they refused our protection. How can Yueyang Chang sect be held responsible for that?"

"And how much is your protection worth?" asked Shen Jiu.

"The price is fair," said a Chang disciple. "Or are you doubting our integrity, Madam Shen?"

Shen Jiu bristled.

"No one is doubting your integrity," Nie Hongyi said lightly. "But Madam Shen raises a valid point. Your sect is small and cannot spare the disciples to protect the roads without payment. Meanwhile, we Nie have the manpower and want your roads to be safe for the merchants who come to Qinghe. I don't see why you would refuse."

Chang Ci'an shook his head slightly. "For a minor sect like Yueyang Chang to allow patrols from a major sect in… We all know what happens after. Or have you been inspired by Sect Leader Wen?"

Nie Lieyan banged his fist on the table. "You dare doubt our good intentions after allowing your sect to be infested with crime? If you cannot protect your people, you shouldn't be a sect leader in the first place!"

Shen Jiu winced at the volume, but he shared the sentiment. It appeared that in this matter he and Nie Lieyan were on the same side.

"Excuse my cousin," said Nie Hongyi apologetically. Shen Jiu did not trust this apology. Anyone who knew Nie Lieyan could see this outburst coming from a mile away. If Nie Hongyi didn't want that, he shouldn't have brought Nie Lieyan to the negotiation in the first place.

"Of course we are also saddened by the lives lost but…" began Chang Ci'an.

"If you really cared about lives lost, you wouldn't hesitate before accepting help," said Nie Mingjue.

So that was what the Nie considered diplomacy. Shen Jiu didn't know what he had been expecting.

"Don't be so harsh, Mingjue," said Nie Hongyi before the Chang side could say anything. "It's reasonable for the Chang Sect to worry about their independence. That's why I wanted to suggest a time limit."

"A time limit?" asked Chang Ci'an.

"Yes, a time limit," said Nie Hongyi. "Give us a month or two to get rid of all the bandits. If new ones appear, it would be easier for your sect to deal with them."

"I'm not sure…" said Chang Ci'an. But he clearly couldn't find a good reason to refuse, so Hongyi quickly pushed him to agree on the terms. Shen Jiu took back his words. Nie Hongyi

was the only one who knew what diplomacy was.

“So this is the face of the Nie righteousness,” said the disciple from before. He had more teeth than his sect leader, who could only throw his weight around when dealing with those weaker than him. “First, you’ll patrol our land, then you’ll offer guidance, next thing we know you’ll send somebody to supervise us!”

“For an innocent party you protest too much!” said Nie Lieyan.

“We are victims here,” began Chang Ci’an.

Shen Jiu interrupted. “Are you though?”

“What are you insinuating?” screamed the disciple. Shen Jiu waved his fan slightly hoping the man's spit wouldn't reach him.

“Let Madam Shen explain,” said Nie Mingjue. “From what I know, she had experience with bandits in Yueyang.”

For the first time since the beginning of the meeting, Meng Yao raised his eyes from his notes. The look he gave Nie Mingjue was simply too sappy.

“From what I’ve seen of them, they were so weak a single disciple could dispose of them. To think that entire sect couldn’t get rid of the issue... That makes one suspicious.”

“You say that you’re victims, but you benefit from the current arrangement,” said Nie Hongyi. “If the bandits suddenly disappeared from Yueyang I imagine you would lose an easy source of income.”

“You think so lowly of us… We would never!” said Chang Ci’an. The red splotches appeared on his face.

“Then prove it,” said Nie Hongyi. “Either you let us deal with the bandits, or you deal with them yourselves. I’m not going to allow it any longer.”

Next came the treaty, which would have taken less time to agree on if the Chang delegation hadn’t dug their heels in. It was agreed that the Nie would be allowed to hunt for bandits for a month, but they could not night hunt on the Chang territory, nor could they take requests for help not connected with the bandits.

When they left the room, Shen Jiu felt disappointment. They won the negotiation, but it didn’t feel like a victory. All Chang Ci’an lost was money and corrupt bastards like him always found ways to get more, so that couldn’t be too much of a loss.

Both delegations were walking out of the reception hall when Shen Jiu heard Xue Yang’s high voice: “Chang Ci’an, prepare to die!”

Shen Jiu searched for the boy with his eyes, but Wei Ying got to him first, grabbing Xue Yang across the middle and holding him up as the brat attempted to struggle free. Meng Yao

rushed to them to get the sword out of Xue Yang's grasp. It was the one Jiang Fengmian gifted to Shen Jiu years ago. It was supposed to be in his room.

"What's the meaning of this?" asked Chang Ci'an, looking nervously at the struggling child.

"Do you remember me? You promised me pastries for running an errand but when I asked to be paid you whipped me and trampled me with your cart!" screamed Xue Yang.

"I've never seen this child in my life," said Chang Ci'an. "The boy is confused."

Shen Jiu could feel his whole body tense, blood pounding in his ears. Of course that bastard could mutilate a child in plain sight, but when called out on it he would claim to be innocent. A single boy's words meant nothing to the gentry and even if they believed him, why do anything? Who cared about some street rat's ruined life?

"Look at my hand!" screamed Xue Yang. The boy's face was wet with tears, his voice hysterical. "There's no pinky because you crushed it! I had to bite it off with my own teeth!"

"I just wanted a pastry," he said, quieter. "You promised me!"

Shen Jiu remembered the times when he was an unwanted child, who could be trampled with a horse or a cart and nobody would care. If he was beaten or threatened, people just walked past him not deigning the sorry sight with their attention. Nobody would interfere on behalf of some dirty street brat.

"Chang Ci'an," said Shen Jiu coldly. "I challenge you to a duel."

"And this is the rock I found in the spring on our way to Baixue Temple," said Ying-ge, pointing to a white stone the size of a chicken heart. "It's jade."

"Is it expensive?" asked Xue Yang idly. He wouldn't steal from his brother, but if he could find precious stones in springs he wanted to know.

"It's too small to carve much out of it. Well, I guess it could be used to make buttons, but that doesn't make it expensive…" said Ying-ge, scratching the back of his head.

"Then why do you have it?" asked Xue Yang.

Xue Yang had no idea why Wei Ying collected rocks of all things. That was just weird. Ying-ge was a little weird, but that was weird even for him.

"It's rare and its colour is pretty," said Ying-ge. "You know what's cool? I have a piece of volcano rock somewhere. Shizun said that it got thrown out of a volcano when it erupted. That's why it's so light! I just don't remember in which qiankun pouch I had stored it…"

Xue Yang saw the chance. "Really? I wanna see the volcano rock, gege!"

Huaisang would say that he was laying it on thick or whatever, but it clearly worked on Ying-ge, because he turned away to check his qiankun pouches in search of the stupid rock.

Xue Yang slipped out while Ying-ge was turned away and ran. Shen Shi's room was empty. Her sword, the stupidly pretty one Jiang Fengmian had given her years ago, sat on the weapon rack. Xue Yang grabbed it. It was heavier than he expected.

This nameless sword would take Chang Ci'an's worthless life.

Xue Yang clutched the blade and rushed to the reception room.

Ying-ge and Yao-ge made sure to watch him every moment the Chang bastards were at the Impure Realm. They even slept in his bed that night, which was nice but also annoying. But because Yao-ge told Ying-ge where he would be during the negotiation, Xue Yang now knew where his target was.

It wasn’t difficult to kill someone.

All he needed was an element of surprise. Just stab the man through his stomach and make sure to twist. Ugly Moustache said that the gut wounds were the worst because shit got into the blood and poisoned it or something. Xue Yang didn’t care how it worked, as long as it worked.

He was lucky because the people started to go out of the reception room before he got there. He saw Shen Shi, and old man Nie, and Ugly Moustache, and… there he was! The bastard.

He just had to run at him.

No warning.

Like a boar.

The doctors said he could never grip as hard with his left hand as with his right. So he had to learn how to do everything with his right hand. But why was it shaking now just like the left one did? It hadn’t been crushed, so what was it afraid of?

Chang Ci’an kept walking. Xue Yang felt like he was going to lose this moment.

“Chang Ci’an, prepare to die!” he screamed. He tried to start running but his feet were frozen in place.

Why wouldn’t they move?

A pair of familiar hands grabbed him around the middle and lifted him into the air. With Ying-ge’s warmth close by, Xue Yang’s limbs came alive again, and he started to wriggle, trying to get out. He still could do it!

Yao-ge rushed to him and tore the sword out of Xue Yang’s grip.

"Easy, A-Yang," Ying-ge murmured. "It's all right."

Damn them both! They said all that stupid stuff about consequences, but Xue Yang didn’t care.

Let them kick him out. If he got his revenge, he'd die happy.

“Do you remember me? You promised me pastries for running an errand but when I asked to be paid you whipped me and trampled me with your cart!” he screamed.

Chang Ci’an shook his head. He said he had never seen Xue Yang before.

Could he really not remember?

Xue Yang had seen this man’s face in feverish nightmares for weeks. He remembered the whip, and the contempt on the man’s face when he turned to the driver and said, “Keep going," while Xue Yang was left behind crying in agony.

“Look at my hand!” screamed Xue Yang. “There’s no pinky because you crushed it! I had to bite it off with my own teeth!”

It had hurt so much. He had thought he was going to die and the crows would eat his eyes and tongue like they did with Lao Xi. His hand had smelled like Lao Xi's corpse, and he had thought maybe he was already dead. Maybe he was just a vengeful ghost like in the stories. That thought was the only thing that gave him relief.

Why couldn’t this man just give him his pastry? He was rich, he could afford it. And he owed this to Xue Yang after he'd delivered that letter and gotten beaten for it. Why did he have to lie?

His eyes stung.

“I just wanted a pastry. You promised me!”

Xue Yang had known Lao Xi since he was very little. She was old and had bad teeth, so she didn't mind sharing food with him.

Lao Xi said that he was a nice good boy and that if he worked hard and was honest, he could lead a good life. He asked whether he could be a woodcarver, because he liked the wooden animals Old Man Ping sold at the market, and Lao Xi said he could.

Xue Yang back then didn't know that adults could lie.

So he worked hard. He didn’t beg like all the other street children. He asked for work and he did his best. That was enough to get something in his stomach.

Not enough for sweets, though.

He could never get enough for sweets.

“Chang Ci’an,” said Shen Shi, her voice scary. “I challenge you to a duel.”

Xue Yang blinked. What was she doing?

Didn’t she say that they couldn’t do anything? That Chang Ci’an was a Sect Leader and nobody would listen to them if they accused him?

“What duel? Sect Leader Nie, are you going to allow it?” asked Chang Ci’an.

He was bigger than Shen Shi. Xue Yang knew that she could fight well, but what if Chang Ci’an was stronger?

“My friend, I’m afraid you are on your own here,” said Nie Hongyi. “I know better than to get in the way of mothers protecting their children.”

“She is not his mother!” said Chang Ci’an loudly. “I… I remember that kid now. A dirty beggar from Kuizhou. He just jumped in the way of my cart one day.”

He was lying. Xue Yang wasn’t a beggar then.

He had to start begging afterward because his hand was too broken to work.

“Get your sword out, coward,” Shen Shi said.

She was cool like that. Her green robes and pretty hair sticks made her look like a fancy lady, but anyone could feel the danger when she had Xiu Ya out.

“This is ridiculous,” said Chang Ci’an.

“If you don’t want to fight a woman, you can fight me,” Ugly Moustache said. “Xue Yang is my student, so I can beat you up on his behalf.”

Did they all grow crazy? They weren't supposed to care.

Xue Yang swallowed his tears. It seemed like there would be a fight. He didn’t know whether to be happy or jealous, and he didn’t have time to think because now everyone was walking to the fighting pit, and Ying-ge put him down and held his hand as they walked, and Yao-ge kept throwing worried looks at him, and…

The swords clashed, making Xue Yang flinch. Shen Shi and Chang Ci’an stood on the elevated platform in the middle of the pit, but it was still hard to see from the back of all the disciples who gathered to watch.

Where did they even come from?

“Come here, A-Yang,” said Yao-ge. “You can watch from my shoulders.”

Xue Yang didn’t need to be asked twice. It was easier to look from Yao-ge’s shoulders, and he smelled like safety.

Xue Yang leaned in as he watched Shen Shi go in circles around Chang Ci’an like a wolf.

He had never been accepted by other street children. But even Xue Yang knew that the biggest, meanest child was the leader.

He had followed Shen Shi for a year now, doing most of the things she told him to do, and it was a good life. He thought they understood each other like fellow street rats, but no street rat would just do what Shen Shi was doing.

You worked together, but if the weakling was attacked, you better leave them behind. Ultimately you had to look out for yourself and yourself only, because nobody else would look out for you.

“Why hadn’t you told me about your history with Chang Ci’an?” asked Huaisang’s giant brother as he pushed through the crowd effortlessly.

Yao-ge made a small startled sound. “We didn’t want to make trouble,” he said.

Huaisang’s brother snorted. “Your mother seems to have another plan.”

Shen Shi almost cut Chang Ci’an's head off. The man’s eyes were wide as he dodged. Xue Yang felt a thrill.

“I’m sorry…” began Yao-ge. He often said he was sorry, but he hardly ever meant it. He’d told Xue Yang that in secret when he explained that you don’t have to be sorry to say sorry. It was really complicated.

“Don’t be,” said Huaisang’s brother. “I don’t know everything, but I’ve heard enough to understand that your brother was wronged.”

“I was afraid that you would want to fight Chang Ci’an yourself if you knew,” said Yao-ge quickly. “I didn’t want to put you in this position.”

“I wouldn’t mind,” said Huaisang’s brother. “I know we haven’t known each other for long, but... we Nie protect our own.”

“Pay attention, you two,” said Ying-ge quickly. “Shizun is about to do something cool. You’re going to miss it if you talk too much.”

Shen Shi really did something cool, flipping her sleeves with currents of air and wrangling the snow into an icy tornado around Chang Ci’an. Then, as the man flailed around, blinded, she sliced with Xiu Ya.

Something fell off the wooden platform. Blood splattered over snow.

Yao-ge tried to turn away so Xue Yang wouldn’t see, but he was too late. Shen Shi had cut off Chang Ci’an’s left hand.

"What the hell," muttered Huaisang's brother, his voice almost lost in the sea of murmurs. "There goes our negotiation."

"You crazy bitch!" gasped Chang Ci'an as he grasped at his bleeding stump. "What have you done!?"

"Don't call my Shizun a bitch!" screamed Xue Yang. "She won fair and square!"

[1] Congee with century egg (皮蛋瘦肉粥) is a classic Cantonese savory rice porridge. It's made by slow-boiling rice with shredded lean pork until the broth is thick and creamy. The dish is defined by the addition of chopped century eggs: duck eggs preserved in ash, salt, and clay, which give them a unique, creamy texture and deep flavor.

Light and nourishing, this dish is a popular comfort food, often served to those who are feeling unwell or recovering from a hangover. return to text ↩

Chapter 38: The price of justice.

Shen Jiu was wiping the blood off Xiu Ya, making sure that it was pristine before he put it back into the sheath. He could hear the Chang disciples throw accusations at him, but he pretended not to notice them, treating them as insignificant insects buzzing next to his ear.

Nie Hongyi had placed himself between them and Shen Jiu the moment the duel ended, so Shen Jiu let him handle it. The man was one of the best fighters he had ever met, not quite Liu Qingge's level, but that brute was called a War God for a reason. Against a handful of Chang disciples, Nie Hongyi wouldn't even break a sweat.

"How can you protect her after this display?" It was the same disciple who had been most outspoken during the negotiation. His sword was drawn, his eyes wild.

Shen Jiu scoffed. If that brazen fool dared to attack, he would slice his throat without a second thought. Self-defence was a better excuse than revenge and there was still a large audience around them.

“Sect Leader Chang accepted the duel,” said Nie Hongyi calmly.

Chang Ci'an himself was barely conscious now, pale and slack-faced, surrounded by his panicked disciples. They crowded close to him, partially out of concern for their leader, partially to keep their distance from Shen Jiu.

That was something Shen Jiu enjoyed about being feared. People who were afraid of him usually didn’t want to be anywhere near his personal space.

“That was not a duel. That was butchery!” said another Chang disciple.

“Well, we Nie are well-known for being descended from butchers.” Nie Hongyi spoke smoothly as if he were joking around at a feast, not protecting his advisor from the consequences of an ill-advised duel.

The disciple's mouth opened and closed. If Shen Jiu was startled by the audacity of the quip, the Chang disciples had to be twice as startled.

Gu Nianyuan climbed onto the platform. He didn’t seem to be in any hurry as he approached his patient, who was clutching at his severed hand in a grotesque scene of desperation. Shen Jiu loathed that man’s unsympathetic nature, but in this moment, it was quite satisfying to see it aimed at somebody Shen Jiu didn’t like.

The head physician knelt beside the Sect Leader, fingers swiftly finding pressure points on the wounded wrist, then produced three needles and drove them into the flesh in quick succession. He held the wrist loosely for a long moment, searching for something only he could feel, and finally nodded.

"This will hold until you reach Yueyang. Have your own physician examine it properly."

He turned to leave. A Chang disciple lunged forward. "Is that it? What kind of doctor are you?"

Gu Nianyuan wasn’t impressed. "What would you have me do? Grow him a new hand? You won't be staying longer, and that means my work here is done."

Shen Jiu had encouraged Nie Hongyi to find a new head physician, but he could still respect the man's audacity. Only someone like Gu Nianyuan could wrangle the sick Nie into following a treatment plan. This lot wouldn't listen to anyone they considered soft.

"We will make known to the other sects how the Nie treat their guests," the disciple spat before they departed.

Shen Jiu couldn’t bring himself to care. He knew the law was on his side, and if his reputation for ruthlessness kept idiots away, he would be pleased with it.
A few months ago, a disciple around Nie Mingjue's age had serenaded him, convinced he was in love. Nie Hongyi had nearly pissed himself laughing. Shen Jiu had resisted the urge to murder the tone-deaf degenerate. He considered himself very diplomatic for that alone.

Once the Changs were no longer staining the Impure Realm with their presence, Nie Hongyi led him to his office. The room was unusually populated. Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue were already there, and Nie Lieyan stood by the window. Shen Jiu prepared himself to be scolded.

"I understand why you did it," Nie Hongyi said, his voice exasperated. "But did you have to do it right after the negotiation?"

“Those Chang bastards are scoundrels anyway,” said Nie Lieyan. “What use is there in negotiating with them?”

With this man as his principal supporter, Shen Jiu was beginning to suspect that he was in the wrong. Though it was more likely that Nie Lieyan just hated the Chang more than he disliked Shen Jiu.

"We have to think of the bigger picture," Nie Hongyi said. "The people of Qinghe and Yueyang will suffer for what happened today."

It still surprised Shen Jiu to see him genuinely care about common people. Yes, trade routes affected prices and supply, and Nie Hongyi knew that. But he could have ignored the issue. Most cultivators would have.

Shen Jiu would understand if Nie Hongyi wanted to punish him for the failure of the negotiation. However, if he was going to be punished, he wanted it to happen straight away so he wouldn’t agonize about it first. Waiting for another shoe to drop was always a part of torture.

“I knew that there would be consequences when I challenged him. If you want to punish me, then do it,” said Shen Jiu crossing his arms in front of his chest.

He noticed Nie Mingjue nod at his words with silent approval and scoffed.

"I'm not going to punish you." Nie Hongyi's voice was tired. "I would have done the same in your place, if it were Huaisang who was hurt. But we have to think about what comes next."

Nie Lieyan waved a hand. "We can patrol without permission. What can the Chang do against us? They're weak."

“Be reasonable, cousin. We shouldn’t misuse our strength this way,” Nie Hongyi chided.

“There’s a discussion conference in a few weeks,” said Nie Mingjue. “We could ask the other sects to help us solve this dispute.”

Meng Yao stood on Nie Mingjue’s right, looking approving. He didn’t participate in the discussion, too young to contribute unless he had something really important to say. However, by his presence here Shen Jiu deduced that this plan was a joined work.

Nie Mingjue was a noble type, so if he discussed the problem with Meng Yao and they found a solution together he would feel compelled to bring the boy along to the discussion. It didn’t even occur to anybody that it was strange how a disciple who had been in the sect for a single year and had only come of age recently was present at the Sect Leader’s inner circle.

“Do you really think they would?” asked Nie Hongyi, his tone doubtful.

"Yunmeng Jiang suffers from the banditry too." Meng Yao spoke firmly. "Their merchants are robbed and murdered in Yueyang territory. I think we can reasonably assume they would take our side."

“The Lan are known for their fairness,” added Nie Mingjue. “That gives us three major sects united by a common cause.”

Nie Hongyi seemed thoughtful, “That can work.”

Shen Jiu said nothing. He couldn’t bring himself to care about this negotiation as much as they did. For him, the suffering of Xue Yang that was happening right before his eyes was more real than the suffering of all those merchants and peasants whom the Nie and Meng Yao seemed to care so much about.

Every moment of every day somebody somewhere was suffering. Who had energy to care about all those hypothetically suffering people? Certainly not Shen Jiu.

The discussion conference was supposed to be hosted by the Yingchuan Wang sect, but a month ago they had declared themselves unable to arrange it and asked the Wen to take their place. Shen Jiu recognized the maneuver for what it was: the sort of power play that, left unchecked, would eventually lead to war.

There was little he could do about it. He wasn't about to risk his life assassinating Wen Ruohan, and he doubted anything short of that would stop the inevitable conflict. That was why he had refused to set foot in Qishan: partly to avoid Wen Ruohan's notice, partly to avoid Jin Guangshan if he could help it.

Meng Yao, by contrast, was eager to go. He wanted to prove himself, to make connections with the cultivation world's elite. Shen Jiu didn't understand the appeal, but he didn't stand in the boy's way. Jin Guangshan would hardly look twice at a random Nie disciple.

The discussion of conference details dragged on until Nie Hongyi was satisfied they had speaking points ready. When they finally left the office, Meng Yao fell into step beside Shen Jiu.

Shen Jiu expected a lecture the moment they were alone, but Meng Yao said nothing. Perhaps he was waiting for privacy.

Two interlopers were waiting in Shen Jiu's room.

“Are they going to kick us out?” asked Xue Yang. He didn’t seem to care much if they did.

“No,” said Shen Jiu.

“We are lucky that Sect Leader Nie values you so much,” said Meng Yao. “Not many sect leaders would be so forgiving.”

The words were pointed, but he made no direct accusation, so Shen Jiu let it go.

"Did you get to keep the hand?" Xue Yang's question startled Shen Jiu out of his sullen thoughts.

"Why would I keep that coward's hand?"

Xue Yang looked at him as if the answer were obvious. "It's your trophy, isn't it? I thought we would get to keep it."

"We could embalm it," Wei Ying offered.

Shen Jiu stared at him. "What use would you have for an embalmed hand?"

"I wonder if it could be raised as a fierce corpse," Wei Ying mused. “No one would expect to be attacked by a hand.”

"How can it be raised if the owner is still alive?" Meng Yao asked, long accustomed to his brother's nonsense. "The hand alone has no soul."

"You're right." Wei Ying's shoulders slumped. "Stupid idea."

"I just wanted to mount it on the wall," Xue Yang said, pouting.

Shen Jiu laughed. The children stared at him as if he had grown a second head, which only made him laugh harder.

"You three are ridiculous." He wiped his eyes. "A-Yao, tell the servants we're taking supper together tonight."

During the meal, Shen Jiu said little, but he didn't scold the children for their chatter. A strange calm had settled over him. Where once the noise of people talking while he ate had grated on him, now he found it almost soothing. Like bamboo rustling in the wind.

Very loud bamboo.

Wei Ying would never learn what the inside voice was, it appeared.

They were almost done with the food when Xue Yang placed the last sweet dumpling on Shen Jiu's plate.

"What is it? Some kind of prank?" asked Shen Jiu suspiciously. Had Xue Yang put hot spice in it? He had seen Wei Ying pull that trick before, though the boy was usually smart enough to hide his involvement.

"You should have it." Xue Yang looked away.

Shen Jiu studied the dumpling, looking for signs of foul play. "Why?"

"A-Yang just wants to thank you for standing up for him," said Wei Ying with a grin.

"Shut up," snapped Xue Yang. "I'm just full."

Shen Jiu ate the dumpling. The pleased look on Xue Yang's face was concerning.

Later, when Wei Ying and Xue Yang stood up to leave, the little brat blurted out, "Thank you!" without meeting Shen Jiu's eyes. Then he ran out of the room.

Wei Ying laughed. "Who knew our A-Yang was so shy!"

Shen Jiu and Meng Yao were left alone after that.

Silently, Meng Yao took a privacy talisman from his sleeve and fixed it to the door.

Shen Jiu sighed. "I was wondering when you were going to scold me."

"I don't want to scold you." Meng Yao's voice was as tired as Shen Jiu felt. "But Mother, can't you have a little foresight?"

Shen Jiu crossed his arms and turned his head away. He felt scolded despite Meng Yao's intentions. "It ended up fine. No one is in trouble, and Xue Yang got his revenge. Now he won't do anything stupid."

That wasn't exactly something that Shen Jiu thought about when he challenged Chang Ci'an. He just wanted the man punished and it was the only legal way he could think of on the spot.

"You made an entire sect our enemy," said Meng Yao quietly.

Shen Jiu scoffed. "A minor sect. And their Sect Leader is more worm than a man, he won't have the guts to retaliate directly."

“He is still a sect leader. He can make our life difficult, and the only thing protecting us from him is the Nie sect’s favor. Weren’t you the one who taught me that a rich man’s favor can quickly run out?”

Shen Jiu grit his teeth. He hated to admit it, but Meng Yao was right. “What was I supposed to do? Allow that wretched man to get away with it? Leave Xue Yang to drown in his resentment?”

The dreams of revenge would lead that boy to ruin. Shen Jiu didn’t want to see that happen. Xue Yang was too bright to turn into the sort of rabid dog he was in the book. It would be a waste.

“We could have dealt with him quietly,” said Meng Yao. “Between the three of us, a hunting accident wouldn’t be difficult to arrange. That would take time, but it would leave no loose ends.”

Shen Jiu stared at his son’s serene face, taken aback. The boy spoke of murder the same way he spoke of dining arrangements. He had forgotten the steel hidden beneath all that silk.

“Killing him would be less satisfying,” said Shen Jiu finally. “He squalled like a pig when I cut off his hand. Now he’ll carry the shame for the rest of his miserable life.”

“It was satisfying, I admit,” said Meng Yao. “But, please, next time… consider all the options? Or at least discuss it with me?”

“Ugh, fine,” said Shen Jiu. “Should I ask for your counsel on when to take a shit as well?”

Meng Yao made a strangled noise. “Mother!”

“What? Too much for you?” asked Shen Jiu in mock concern. The boy still was so sensitive about vulgarity, it was amusing.

Meng Yao covered his face with his hand. “Sometimes I wonder if A-Yang is your true child. You two are too alike.”

This was Shen Jiu’s turn to choke. “Take that back! I’m nothing like that brat.”

Meng Yao lowered his hand, his face pitying. “Of course, Mother. Not alike in any way.”

“Go away already,” said Shen Jiu. “I’m sure you have important things to assist Nie Mingjue with in the morning.”

“I do,” said Meng Yao with a smile. “Goodnight, Mother.”

The week before the discussion conference was spent in anticipation. To his relief, no one pushed Shen Jiu to change his mind and attend. Nie Hongyi likely assumed he wanted to avoid facing Chang Ci'an again.

That plan, however, fell apart when the consequences finally caught up to Shen Jiu.

He knew something was wrong the moment Nie Hongyi marched to his room without warning. Lately, the man always asked permission before invading his space. The change was immediately noticeable. It didn't take Shen Jiu long to guess the cause. Nie Hongyi had a letter clutched in his hand, crumpling it with his grip.

He hadn't seen Nie Hongyi this angry in a long time. The man began raving immediately. "You won't believe what that self-important asshole wrote me! I don't know who Wen Ruohan thinks he is. He must consider himself the Emperor's equal!"

“What does Sect Leader Wen want?” asked Shen Jiu, already bracing himself for the worst.

"The Chang sect complained to him. Now he 'feels concerned by the Nie sect's bullying and strong-arm tactics.' So he wants you to come so he can hear 'both sides of the story.'" Nie Hongyi's voice was full of contempt. "What other side is there? That lout accepted the duel! It's not against the law to harm your opponent."

“Can we ignore the summons?” asked Shen Jiu, but he already knew the answer.

“Wen Ruohan will twist it to paint the Nie as the villains, and that snake Jin Guangshan will back him up.” Nie Hongyi stopped and took a deep breath to calm himself. “I’m afraid you’ll have to come. But I promise I’ll keep you safe.”

Promises, promises, again with the promises.

It would be safer for Shen Jiu to just leave the cultivation world altogether and not rely on another honorable man. Not again.

He thought of the children. Their talents were too bright to muddle in obscurity. He thought of Nie Huaisang, one of the brightest students he had ever worked with when it came to the arts. He thought of Meng Yao's growing feelings. And lastly, he thought of how much he was growing to enjoy spending time with Nie Hongyi.

“There is something you need to know…” Shen Jiu hesitated. “There is a person in power who might recognize me. He might… speak about my past.”

“Don’t tell me that you and Wen Ruohan have history,” said Nie Hongyi, a look of horror on his face.

Shen Jiu shook his head. “Not him. It’s a former client. From my previous place of occupation.”

Nie Hongyi sighed, understanding immediately. “Jin Guangshan? I should have guessed. It complicates things, but I doubt he will speak up. If he does, his wife might finally snap and do us all a favor.”

Shen Jiu bristled. “If he does, you won’t be the one ruined.”

Shen Jiu wouldn’t be the only one ruined. All his children, all his students… He remembered how easily the non-existent obscenity could taint a person and how hard it was to wash out.

“If you remain a cultivator, there will always be a danger of meeting him. Better do it on your own terms. If he makes any claims… with Jiang Fengmian and me backing you up, he will look like a joke, don’t you think?”

Nie Hongyi spoke confidently, his words logical. Shen Jiu still didn't like it. A part of him was afraid to see whose face Jin Guangshan was wearing. It was absurd, of course. How would the author know what Qiu Jianluo looked like? The man was long dead.

So Shen Jiu would go to the discussion conference. They spent the rest of the afternoon discussing the details, making sure they were on the same page. But once they were finished, another worry made its appearance.

“Don’t tell A-Yao what I have told you today.”

Nie Hongyi looked thoughtful, then understanding washed over him. “His father…” he didn’t finish the sentence. “Better a dead father than one like that, I suppose. Your secret is safe with me.”

“Thank you,” said Shen Jiu quietly before Nie Hongyi left.

Lately, it seemed he did nothing but cause Nie Hongyi trouble.

The man looked back with a smile. "That's not something you have to thank me for."

What a ridiculous thing to say. Shen Jiu scoffed.

He figured their conversation must have earned him a fair number of Lore Points. He checked with the System. One thousand, nine hundred and fifty-two. He was so close. Perhaps the conference would give him more opportunities.

The damned System was getting stingy.

Mother was acting stranger than usual.

Before, she hadn’t minded that he was going to accompany Nie Mingjue to the discussion conference. She had even said that he should pass her regards to Jiang Yanli, who would also be there.

Now that she had to go herself, Mother was suddenly against him going. It was absurd, considering they had to set off tomorrow and all the preparations had already been made.

“Somebody has to watch the children,” Mother said.

She could lie better than that and they both knew it.

“The whole sect will be here to watch them. I heard that Nie Lieyan was asked to stay behind and manage things. He knows how to deal with A-Yang.”

Meng Yao had known Nie Lieyan would be a good teacher for his brother after A-Yang stabbed the man and got away with it. The man seemed to find the incident amusing, which was mildly concerning, but better than other alternatives.

“You want me to trust him with your brothers?” Mother asked. There was a nervous tension in her voice that betrayed that something was bothering her.

“He has been teaching A-Yang successfully for a year, hasn’t he?” asked Meng Yao. It was a fact no one could argue with.

“I will feel better if you are here.” Like always, Mother was stubborn. But her words rang sincere, so now Meng Yao thought that there was something he wasn’t aware of.

“You need me there. No offence, Mother, but when it comes to politics, you need all the help you can get.” He was putting it mildly. For a person who had taught him all his early lessons on being likeable, Mother was startlingly incompetent when it came to communication.

She could lie and pretend well. She even understood how people worked, for the most part. But when it came to talking to people, it seemed she could rarely do so without causing some sort of misunderstanding or even insult. After she got her golden core, she let go of all the pretense of politeness and began insulting people to their face. It was at times distressing.

“I have no patience for politics but I know how it works. I don’t need you to hold my hand through it,” said Mother dismissively.

“So you intended for things to go the way they did at Lotus Pier?” asked Meng Yao pointedly.

“It was inevitable that things would go this way,” said Mother.

“It really wasn’t,” said Meng Yao. But now wasn’t the time to dwell on past mistakes. “This discussion conference is the perfect opportunity for me to get introduced to the cultivation elites. Besides that, I promised Shixiong I’d help fix whatever is left of the negotiation with Yueyang Chang after your duel. I have to go.”

He also would be introduced to his rival. Meng Yao was not going to allow Nie Mingjue to spend a week in Lan Xichen’s company. The things that Nie Huaisang had reported to him were concerning.

“I don’t want you to go,” said Mother almost helplessly. Meng Yao recognized this note of desperation. Now it made sense.

“Will my father be there at the conference?” he asked quickly.

He hadn't thought of his father in months. Things were going well in the Nie sect, and the question of his parentage had stopped feeling so urgent, especially with no new information to pursue.

Mother’s eyes widened slightly, betraying that he was right. “No,” she lied. “Why would you think so?”

“Then there’s no issue if I come, is there?” asked Meng Yao.

He won this round.

The next morning, they set out for Qishan. Meng Yao had put on his best robes in Nie colors, and he was pleased to see that his mother had done the same. Their status was fragile, because they weren’t formally part of the Nie sect. So a straightforward demonstration of their allegiance would send the correct message.

“That’s the first time you will fly with no breaks for such a long stretch,” said Nie Mingjue as they prepared to set off. “If you feel tired let me know immediately. That’s not something that can be endured safely.”

Lately this began to irritate Meng Yao. He wasn’t Nie Huaisang who made a show of needing his elder brother’s help for every little thing. He wanted to be treated as an equal, not as a fragile younger brother.

“Of course, Shixiong,” said Meng Yao with his best smile.

Nie Mingjue nodded, pleased with the exchange. Meng Yao went to speak to his brothers who stood there at the edge of the crowd. Mother had already spoken to them and was visibly irritated by whatever Xue Yang had said. It appeared that they were getting back to their normal dynamic.

“Don’t make any trouble while I’m gone,” he said. He knew they would still make trouble, but he hoped they would at least try not to get caught.

“When have we ever made trouble?” asked Wei Ying, widening his eyes innocently.

Meng Yao gave him an unimpressed look.

“Why do you have to go anyway?” complained Xue Yang. It was the seventh time this week. “You should stay with us.”

“Yao-ge has a very important business to get to,” said Nie Huaisang, who must have finished speaking to his brother. He definitely wasn’t speaking about politics.

He gave Meng Yao a secretive grin. That boy enjoyed his plotting.

It was easy to put an idea of looking through Nie Mingjue’s mail in Huaisang’s head. That’s how Meng Yao knew that his correspondence with Lan Xichen was cordial and intimate but not fully romantic. Meng Yao wasn’t going to allow their friendship to progress this way even if he could see that those two liked each other.

Meng Yao was obviously a better choice for Nie Mingjue. He wasn’t a sect heir, so he could live in Qinghe and potentially marry into the family. He also got along well with Nie Mingjue’s family and sect mates, and his social skills nicely complemented Nie Mingjue’s righteous bluntness.

It didn't matter how nice and well-spoken Lan Xichen was and how beautiful his calligraphy was, Meng Yao wasn't going to allow this man to win.

The flight to Qishan was long and tiring. The cold air and picturesque view below put Meng Yao in a thinking mood.

He had discussed his strategies when dealing with Lan Xichen with Nie Huaisang in detail the day before, so his mind naturally drifted to a more confusing topic.

His father would be there.

He had no way of telling who his father was, but if he watched his mother carefully, he could analyze her reactions. He remembered that Nie ghost saying something about his eyes. Fox eyes, she had said…

That could be nothing. Whatever cultivators she had known in life were certainly long dead. But it wouldn't hurt to look for an eye shape like his. He could ask Jiang Yanli to help with that.

The thought of meeting his friend in person warmed his heart. They had exchanged correspondence regularly, but it wasn't the same as speaking in person. Although they would have to be careful, as Jiang Yanli's fiancé would also be present.

When they landed in the Nightless City, it was past midday, and Meng Yao felt stiff. His golden core was strong, but he wasn't used to long flights.

They were met by Sect Leader Wen's second cousin at the plaza in front of the resplendent Scorching Sun Palace. It wasn't unheard of not to delegate meeting the guests, especially during such large events with multiple delegations arriving, but it did show a certain dismissiveness.

You are not important enough. That was the message.

Meng Yao remembered Nie Mingjue's warnings about the Wen sect and their aspirations of grandeur.

He had allowed himself to get distracted with his search for his father and his relationship with Nie Mingjue, so he let the purpose of this conference slip away from his mind. He wasn't going to forget again. His first concern was keeping his family safe, his second getting the Nie sect the agreement with Yueyang Chang.

Everything else was less important.

"Yue Yao, you don't mind sharing quarters with me, do you?" asked Nie Mingjue.

Meng Yao blinked. He didn't usually allow his attention to slip this way, but he must have missed some exchange with servants. His mother and Sect Leader Nie had already left.

"Of course not," said Meng Yao with feeling.

He had thought of suggesting it. He could say that he didn't feel comfortable with other disciples. That however was something Nie Huaisang would do and that wasn't an image Meng Yao wanted to lean into.

He didn't expect Nie Mingjue to be the one to suggest it. It was a very good sign.

After they had been shown to their shared quarters by a quick-eyed servant, Nie Mingjue surprised him again. "I'm going to meet with Lan Xichen. Do you want to come with me?"

"I would hate to get in the way," said Meng Yao demurely.

He didn't think that he would have to see his rival this quickly. His hair had to be a mess after the long flight.

"You won't get in the way. Xichen has been begging me to introduce you two for months."

Meng Yao knew that because he had read Nie Mingjue's correspondence, so he knew it wasn't an exaggeration.

Lan Xichen must have wanted to study his rival in person. Meng Yao was onto him.

"If you don't mind, I would love to come," said Meng Yao.

"Why would I offer if I minded?" asked Nie Mingjue, shaking his head. "Let's go. He must be waiting already. He's like you about appointments. Always comes in advance, so I feel guilty for making him wait."

Meng Yao smiled. Nie Mingjue really was considerate. "Shixiong is always on time so he shouldn't feel guilty."

"I should come before you some time. Give you a taste of your own medicine," grumbled Nie Mingjue.

Meng Yao would have to make sure to be extra early for all appointments with Nie Mingjue then.

He followed Nie Mingjue to a small garden, lost in the grandness of the Nightless City. It was quite picturesque but in an austere way, which was something that had to appeal to Nie Mingjue's rarely expressed taste.

"We used to meet there during the last conference in Qishan, three years ago," explained Nie Mingjue as they entered the garden.

Meng Yao noted the fact. The discussion conferences were supposed to be rotated among sects both minor and major, though the minor sects could refuse due to lack of resources. But it seemed that the Wen had designs on hosting all of them, scaring away the minor sects with their influence.

He was distracted from politics the moment he saw Lan Xichen.

Nie Mingjue had never mentioned that his friend was this beautiful.

Where Nie Mingjue was a sturdy pine, majestic and reassuring, Lan Xichen was like a magnolia tree poised and serene. He wore a white headband with a cloud motif that reminded Meng Yao of magnolia blossoms. His face was a work of art, his stature impressive, and his bearing welcoming.

Meng Yao was in trouble.

“Mingjue-xiong,” greeted Lan Xichen warmly. Even his voice was beautiful. “And this must be…”

“Yue Qingming,” Nie Mingjue introduced him. It was strange to hear this name from him. He had struggled with switching to the formal address, so Meng Yao had permitted him to use his birth name, relishing the intimacy.

“I’m glad to finally meet you,” said Lan Xichen with utmost sincerity. “Mingjue-xiong spoke highly of you and it’s something rare for him.”

Of course it was rare. Nie Mingjue had high standards for himself and others. That was something Meng Yao appreciated about him.

He struggled to find words. That wasn’t something he was prepared for.

How could he rival… someone like this? It was like a firefly trying to compare to a star.

“You make it sound like I’m stingy with praise,” said Nie Mingjue.

“Nie Huaisang does complain that you don’t praise his paintings well enough,” teased Meng Yao, finding a familiar ground.

“What am I supposed to say if I don’t understand art. I’m not an artistic sort like the two of you,” said Nie Mingjue bluntly.

Lan Xichen smiled at that in a way that showed that he found it endearing. “I did offer to teach you, if you remember. You said your hands were made for a saber not a brush.”

Nie Mingjue did look really well with a saber in his hands…

“You can just say that his choice of color is tasteful and his brush work is elegant,” said Meng Yao.

Nie Mingjue scoffed. “As if I know whether it’s tasteful or elegant.”

Meng Yao would teach Nie Mingjue to lie one of those days.

“Qingming-di, Mingjue-xiong said that you play the qin. If you’d like we could play a duet while we are here,” suggested Lan Xichen.

Meng Yao felt uneasy. Such a form of address, together with such a bold invitation… what was Lan Xichen planning? Did he want to speak with Meng Yao privately and show his true colors? It was hard to imagine anything nefarious hiding behind that serene smile, but people couldn't be trusted.

"I would be honored to, though I'm sure my skills are lacking compared to your standards," said Meng Yao.

If Lan Xichen wanted to mock his skill he would be severely disappointed. Meng Yao was taught by his mother, and she didn't allow mediocrity.

Lan Xichen's smile widened slightly, genuinely pleased. Meng Yao felt stricken by the sight. "It's just that I feel playing together is a good way to get to know each other."

Nie Mingjue scoffed. "If you want to get to know each other, sparring is the best way."

Lan Xichen nodded. "This is also true. I suspect we will get an opportunity to spar during the conference."

Somehow Meng Yao looked forward to it. He should have been agonising over having to face a rival with more training and experience in front of Nie Mingjue, but instead he just wondered what Lan Xichen would be like in a spar.

He thought of playing music together and felt familiar heat bite at his cheeks. He had to use cultivation to stop himself from blushing.

That was a strange way to react to one's rival.

Lan Xichen finally appeared, which reminded me that I have been meaning to add the characters' ages. Most of those are just my best guess, so don't take them as canon.

Yue Qingming (Yue Yao/Meng Yao) - 15
Wei Ying - 14
Xue Yang - 8
Jiang Yanli - 16
Jiang Cheng - 14
Jin Zixuan (Jin Yu) - 15
Lan Xichen (Lan Huan) - 17
Lan Wangji (Lan Zhan) - 15
Nie Mingjue - 18
Nie Huaisang - 14

Some of the Adults
Nie Hongyi - 44
Lan Qiren - 34
Jiang Fengmian - 41
Yu Ziyuan - 41
Madam Jin (Yu Heling) - 40

Jin Guangshan - 42
Meng Shi - 35

Chapter 39: Gentle, demure, and unnoticeable.

As the noon crept closer, Shen Jiu felt his nerves tighten like qin strings. The opening feast would be held while the sun was high over the Nightless City, and Shen Jiu would be pressed to attend. After the host had personally requested his presence, there was no skipping it.

He spent the morning in meditation, attempting to get some peace of mind. Hongyi had offered to show him around the Nightless City while they had time, but that held the danger of stumbling into the man he most feared seeing.

So, he meditated.

Then he played a calming melody on his qin, his mind too distracted to focus and his fingers too well-trained to go astray.

Then he meditated some more.

When the sun began to lower, Shen Jiu stood up and reached for his hairbrush. He tied his hair in a modest bun[1] at his nape with a plain ribbon, going for modesty over beauty.

He had allowed himself to stray from the image of a modest widow in recent years, experimenting with hairstyles and makeup to find something that felt natural to him. This way he finally felt like the reflection in the mirror was his own. He didn't know when he got so used to wearing makeup that without it he felt naked and defenseless.

Shen Jiu hoped that Jin Guangshan wouldn't recognize him like this. He also hoped that the role of a grieving widow would make him less noticeable, more sympathetic, an inconsequential figure that could be easily forgotten.

He didn't put on the mourning robes, however. If he had to sheathe his teeth, let the Nie beast snarl at his belt. The dark green of his robes wasn't far from his usual colors, and Shen Jiu didn't mind the additional protection that came from declaring his allegiance.

His fan would have to serve as a protection talisman. It would help steady his nerves, and it would remind Jiang Fengmian of their friendship. The maple tree would show his connection to Yunmeng Jiang better than anything else.

Nie Hongyi came to fetch him personally. He gave Shen Jiu a long, studying look but didn't comment on his appearance. Shen Jiu's jaw tightened. "If you have something to say, just say it."

"I'm just not sure playing at modestly will work with your manner of speaking," pointed out Nie Hongyi.

"This humble widow has no understanding of what Sect Leader Nie might be alluding to," said Shen Jiu in a gentle cadence. He waved his fan theatrically as he stared at Nie Hongyi adoringly.

Nie Hongyi raised his eyebrows. “Now this is uncanny.”

They joined their disciples. Surprise flickered across the younger ones' faces—they weren't used to seeing him so modest. Only Meng Yao and Nie Mingjue showed no reaction.

His son, of course, was accustomed to Shen Jiu's many faces and had too much control to reveal anything. Nie Mingjue, meanwhile, might genuinely not have noticed anything different. The young man was delightfully indifferent to female beauty.

As they marched into the banquet hall, Shen Jiu walked behind Nie Hongyi, slightly to his left, while Nie Mingjue took his father's right. The host had not yet arrived, but guests were already streaming in.

The servant took them to their assigned tables, facing the Lan, easily recognizable by their white forehead ribbons. Nie Hongyi paused to greet a persnickety-looking man with moustaches.

“You Lan always come in advance, don’t you, Qiren?”

The man didn’t react to the rudeness. “Sect Leader Nie,” he greeted. “It’s unusual to see you this early. It shows that even those set in their ways can improve.”

Shen Jiu had no idea whether it was supposed to be a joke. Lan Qiren didn’t seem like the joking type.

“We haven’t seen each other in some time,” said Nie Hongyi lightly. “Let us catch up during the conference.”

“If my schedule allows it, I will let you know,” said Lan Qiren.

Shen Jiu glanced at the young Lan standing nearby. That could only be Lan Xichen - he had a cloud motif of the main family sewn on his ribbon and his headpiece alone could feed a family of five for a year. He seemed to be exchanging looks with Nie Mingjue and... why was he smiling at A-Yao?

Shen Jiu had expected the two to take a liking to each other, given how close they were in the story he remembered. But when had they had the opportunity to become so friendly?

Lan Qiren didn’t seem eager to continue the conversation, but Nie Hongyi never let trivialities like this deter him. “Let me introduce you to my new advisor. Madam Shen has been invaluable this year.”

The man's critical gaze moved to Shen Jiu, and something about it struck him as familiar. The last time Shen Jiu had felt himself assessed like this, he was a disciple. Perhaps that was simply because Lan Qiren was a teacher.

“I have heard about your feats as a teacher, Madam,” he said politely. “Second Young Master Nie is a challenging student.”

Some of Nie Huaisang's former teachers were Lan, Shen Jiu recalled. He could imagine what they'd reported about the experience. “This one has nothing on Teacher Lan,” he demurred. “Her experience is limited, her knowledge lacking. All success in educating Second Young Master Nie is due to luck.”

Lan Qiren’s eyes narrowed slightly. “You do yourself a disservice, Teacher Shen[2]. Your reputation has been earned so to call it a lack is to insult yourself and your profession.”

Shen Jiu seethed. He was doing what was expected of a female in his position. How was it his fault that humility was forced down his throat?

"Should this one speak of her achievements honestly, she would be reprimanded for boasting unnecessarily," said Shen Jiu. His mask of humble widow slipped, pierced by sheer irritation. "The privilege of sincerity is not accessible to those having to live within the constraints of society."

Lan Qiren looked startled. “Your view does have some merit. I will have to think on that.”

“Make sure you do,” said Shen Jiu, his voice sharper than he wanted it to be. He reminded himself that he was supposed to be gentle, demure, and unnoticeable.

“That was priceless,” said Nie Hongyi as they moved to take their seats, the feast soon to begin. Shen Jiu stomped on the man’s foot hard as he walked past him to the place reserved for the advisor.

“Apologies,” said Shen Jiu insincerely. “This one is clumsy.”

Nie Hongyi stifled a laugh as he sat down. Shen Jiu forced his face back into an expression of gentle submissiveness. He had allowed himself to get rusty. This used to be much easier.

From where Shen Jiu sat, he couldn't see the Jin delegation clearly, and he thought that was for the best. He could, however, see the Jiang well, and he met Jiang Fengmian's eyes for a moment as they waited. The man didn’t seem offended over Shen Jiu’s last letter, which was good news.

Wen Ruohan came late, well after everyone had taken their places. Flanked by two younger men - his sons, Shen Jiu supposed - the man had a sort of unholy energy to him. It wasn't that Shen Jiu had read the book and knew the man's future as a tyrant. He had no expectations based on that alone as tyrants came in different forms. This was something else.

Something that made Shen Jiu dread facing this man.

Wen Ruohan walked through the hall, his white robes with blood red trim making him look regal. He didn’t turn his head, so Shen Jiu only got a passing view of his profile. He didn’t dare to stare for too long to check whether it was a face he recognized.

The man's sons took their places a step above the rest of the room: one haughty, one stoic. Wen Ruohan climbed higher still, the dais looking down on the hall. He looked familiar, but

Shen Jiu couldn't place it, just like with Lan Qiren. Were the faces of people he once knew beginning to fade from his memory? If so, what would he forget next?

The silence stretched as Wen Ruohan looked over his guests. No one dared to speak. But Nie Hongyi looked annoyed, as if he might say something if the silence stretched much longer.

“Esteemed sect leaders, this one is pleased to greet you at the Scorching Sun Palace,” Wen Ruohan began, his voice smooth but lacking genuine pleasure. “It is important for the sects to have this opportunity to meet face to face, so when the Wang Sect found themselves unable to host, this one could not bear to see the discussion conference canceled.”

Out of this man’s mouth humility came out as mockery.

Wen Ruohan spoke politely, but there was a certain leisure in the way he sat, a certain amusement in his voice that made Shen Jiu feel as though they were all mice waiting for the cat to play with them. And this cat wasn't the street kind, the kind that bites into the rodent's throat quickly to sate its hunger. No, this cat was well-fed. It just wanted entertainment.

“Tomorrow we will begin sharing experiences and comparing might,” continued Wen Ruohan. “We will sort out grievances and build bridges. But today let us feast.”

On cue, the stoic son jumped to his feet, raising a cup of wine. “Let’s drink in honor of my father, who generously organized this conference.”

They didn't have much choice. They stood and raised their cups. At least the wine tasted better than the Nie sect’s usual fare.

The hall became livelier as the servers began to bring in the food, but unlike most people in the room, Shen Jiu's appetite didn't recover. He picked at the food half-heartedly, waiting for this part to end.

When people began mingling, Nie Hongyi was the first one to stand up. “I’ll greet Sect Leader Wen personally,” he said. That didn’t sound like something he was looking forward to. “Why don’t you speak to the Jiangs in the meantime? Judging by how often they have been writing, they are missing you greatly.”

Shen Jiu winced. After the Jiangs' visit to Lotus Pier, they had begun exchanging correspondence regularly. Letters from Jiang Fengmian inquiring about his health were expected. Letters from Jiang Yanli telling him about her studies were unexpected but welcome. Letters from Yu Ziyuan, however… Shen Jiu simply didn't know how to respond to those.

Yu Ziyuan mostly complained about her husband and fussed over her children, so Shen Jiu began to respond in kind. Xue Yang and Wei Ying were a golden mine of anecdotes, and Nie Hongyi annoyed him often enough to complain about. It was almost entertaining, writing down all his petty grievances.

He was still writing to Sun Peizhi regularly, but she knew too little of the cultivation world to understand much of what Shen Jiu could write about.

Everything was fine until Jiang Fengmian got it into his head that Shen Jiu and Yu Ziyuan were friends now and began asking him for advice. At first it was, “How do I let my wife know that I disagree with her training method because it's disheartening, not because I think she can't teach disciples?” But it quickly turned into outright complaining.

So Shen Jiu would receive two letters. The first would say things like, “I know he only invited me out of duty,” and “He pretends to care, but I can see he's just guilty about his past actions,” and “I'm sure he wishes he'd married someone more convenient.”

The second would say, “I try to get to know her as a person, but it feels like I'm the only one trying,” and “It's like she misinterprets my words on purpose,” and “I don't know how she could feel any affection for me when she seems to dislike my entire character.”

It got exhausting quickly, so Shen Jiu snapped. Instead of responding, he sent Yu Ziyuan a compilation of the letters Jiang Fengmian had sent him, and sent Jiang Fengmian the letters Yu Ziyuan had written. If they had been angry about it, their complaints didn’t have the time to reach him by mail, so now Shen Jiu would have to face whatever fallout there would be.

He walked to the Jiang delegation accompanied by Nie Mingjue and Meng Yao. The rest of the disciples had wandered off to see to their own acquaintances among the other sects.

Yu Ziyuan didn’t seem mad at him enough to show it, so Shen Jiu took it as a good sign. “I recall you writing that you were too busy with sect business to attend,” she said the moment the greetings were over.

“There was a change of plans,” Shen Jiu said vaguely.

He didn’t want to tell them what happened, but under Yu Ziyuan’s pointed questions and Jiang Fengmian’s concerned ones, he ended up telling the whole story anyway.

“This is appalling,” said Yu Ziyuan. “Perhaps your actions were harsh, but it is not the first time a duel ended up with one party mutilated. Nobody asked those men to explain themselves.”

She said men with such derision that even Shen Jiu was impressed.

As they spoke of the incident, their children had gone aside, talking in their own small circle. Nie Mingjue was doing Meng Yao a service by coming with him like this. It made his conversation with Jiang Yanli provoke fewer questions.

Behind them, Shen Jiu noticed three figures in yellow approaching. Madam Jin marched forward, her hand on her son's shoulder, pushing him. Jin Zixuan looked like he wanted to be anywhere but here.

There was a third person with them. A man in robes with wide golden trim and a peony embroidered on the chest. Shen Jiu blinked, unable to comprehend what he was seeing. The jaw was more square, the lips thinner. He was taller and held himself with fox-like smugness, but the similarity was still there.

Why the hell did he look like Shang Qinghua of all people? It was so absurd it was almost funny, but Shen Jiu didn't feel like laughing.

Remembering that he could be recognized, Shen Jiu took out his fan and held it to partially conceal his face. He would have worn a veil, but that would attract too much attention.

[Name: Jin Guangshan. Occupation: the Sect Leader of the Jin Sect. Role: a former client, lover and co-conspirator.]

Shen Jiu blinked. What was that last one?

"What do you mean by co-conspirator?" he thought, while the Jin and Jiang couples went through greetings.

[Limited offer: learn the history of Meng Shi's and Jin Guangshan's relationship for one thousand Lore Points!]

"Fuck off," thought Shen Jiu.

"And who is your beautiful companion?" asked the waste of space, his eyes running slowly over Shen Jiu's body. The leer was so obvious that even his wife glared at him. If he recognized Shen Jiu, he didn't show it.

"Madam Shen," said Yu Ziyuan before Jiang Fengmian could lead with his full name. Smart. Jin Guangshan could recognize the "Shi" part of his name, but he didn't know the name "Shen". "A close friend of ours," added Yu Ziyuan fiercely.

When did Shen Jiu become a close friend of theirs?

"She is Wei Changze's sister, so she might as well be family," said Jiang Fengmian in an unusual tone. Did Shen Jiu's ears trick him or was it anger?

"I haven't seen you in years, Madam Yue," said Madam Jin. "Let the three of us catch up."

That allowed them to step away from Jin Guangshan. As they walked past him, Shen Jiu noticed Madam Jin hiss at her son, "Zixuan, what are you standing here for? Talk to your fiancé!" The boy looked miserable.

As Shen Jiu stood there facing Yu Ziyuan and Madam Jin, it hit him that the woman who looked like Qi Qingqi was married to a man who looked like Shang Qinghua. They even had a child together. Shen Jiu's body had a child with the man who looked like Shang Qinghua and dressed like he was one of the corrupt bastards from Huan Hua Palace.

"This man has no shame," said Madam Jin furiously. "I can tolerate it when he pays too much attention to the serving girls, but this! This is an embarrassment."

"I don't know how you can tolerate it," said Yu Ziyuan, disgusted. "If Fengmian dared to look this way at one of my maids…"

“Not all of us are as lucky as you,” said Madam Jin sharply. It was almost too sharp, considering that the two of them were friends.

“With a husband like this you shouldn’t be employing young women in the first place,” said Shen Jiu. He could imagine what was happening to those poor girls.

A slave and a servant were different on paper, but in practice, until the contract was fulfilled, a servant wasn’t treated much better than a slave. Of course, cultivators liked to employ educated staff or even weak cultivators from minor sects, but that didn't give them much protection in practice.

A thought occurred to him. What if the author of the book was one of the female disciples? Perhaps that was why Jin Guangshan bore a resemblance to Shang Qinghua. Shen Jiu was the man's shixiong… Shang Qinghua had always acted rodent-like in his company, always scurrying and deferential. But he could have been different with disciples.

Had Shen Jiu failed to notice something despicable happening at his own sect? Was he like Qiu Haitang, not noticing the crimes of the man he called his martial brother?

The thought was driving him mad.

Madam Jin scoffed. “As if that would help anything. If he can't rub his itch at home, he will just go elsewhere. Don’t you think I’ve tried?”

How like the gentry to care only for themselves. Who cares if a servant girl gets violated, as long as it keeps your degenerate husband at home and stops him from shaming you in a brothel or a song house?

Disgusting. To think how much effort Shen Jiu had to put in just to rub elbows with the likes of Jin Guangshan and Madam Jin.

Shen Jiu was sick of those people.

“What a kind mistress you are, Madam Jin,” said Shen Jiu bitterly. “Excuse me. There’s something I need to discuss with Sect Leader Nie.”

Madam Jin opened her mouth to say something, but Shen Jiu left before she could.

He almost stumbled into Nie Hongyi as he hurried through the crowd, searching for him. Shen Jiu tried not to let his desperation show, but…

“Is everything alright?” Nie Hongyi asked. “I didn’t think…”

“When can I leave?” asked Shen Jiu directly. He didn’t want to stay in this room with those people.

“Are you tired of all the socializing?" asked Nie Hongyi, loud enough that some people likely heard him. “I've already spoken to Sect Leader Wen, so we can leave. Let me just have a quick word with Mingjue. It's a good opportunity for him to practice, especially with your boy here to assist him.”

“You don’t have to…” began Shen Jiu.

Nie Hongyi waved his words away and marched to where A-Yao and Nie Mingjue were speaking to Jiang Yanli. Shen Jiu forced himself to stay still, hoping he appeared aloof, if irritated, when Meng Yao glanced at him in worry.

When Nie Hongyi returned, he offered Shen Jiu his arm with a grin. “Do you want to have that tour around the city now or do you want to retire?”

“Whatever you want,” said Shen Jiu. “I just don’t want to be here.”

Nie Hongyi’s arm felt solid under his hand as they walked out of the room.

Jiang Yanli hadn't seen her fiancé in years. He had grown tall and handsome, like a character from a novel. His sect's colors made him look regal, and his aloof bearing suited him well.

Being married to him wouldn’t be a hardship. Not in this aspect at least.

Despite years of regular correspondence, he needed to be pushed by his mother to come greet her. Did he even want to speak to her?

Yanli was being unfair. She had long figured out that Jin Zixuan wasn’t very skilled when it came to social interaction. He didn’t seem to know what to say even when he was writing letters and Yanli was in the middle of conversation with two other people. Perhaps he didn’t want to interrupt.

She did what was expected of her in the situation.

“Young Master Jin, let me introduce you to Young Master Nie. You and Yue Qingming are, of course, acquainted, but last time you met, he hadn't received his courtesy name yet.”

Qingming was a beautiful name, though in private Yanli would still like to call him A-Yao.

“Yes,” said Jin Zixuan. “The teacher’s son.”

Yanli didn’t want to see his words as dismissive, but they certainly sounded that way.

It wasn’t surprising that Nie Mingjue took offence. “Madam Shen is now my father’s advisor as well as my brother’s honored teacher. I can only hope that Yue Yao will accept the same position when I become the sect leader.”

Yanli’s eyes found her teacher. She looked displeased, which was expected after talking to Jin Guangshan. Yanli’s Shizun was an exceptionally attractive woman, which was at times a disadvantage.

In a whirl of robes, Shen Shi turned around and walked away. Was there a disagreement?

Yanli looked at her friend, but A-Yao seemed to be basking in Nie Mingjue’s defence. He was luckier than Yanli when it came to romance.

“If there’s any way I can be of use to Shixiong, I’ll be happy to do it.”

How bold! Not that Nie Mingjue seemed to notice, nodding seriously. Perhaps Qingming wasn’t as lucky as Yanli had thought.

“Mingjue-xiong, Qingming-di,” called Lan Xichen as he approached their group. He offered a polite nod to Jin Zixuan and a warmer smile to Jiang Yanli. “Young Master Jin. Young Mistress Jiang.”

Yanli admired the graceful slope of his nose and the height of his cheekbones. Perhaps she had a fiancé, but she also had eyes and her eyes found Lan Xichen rather pleasing to look at.

“I have been looking for you,” said Lan Xichen addressing Nie Mingjue. “What I didn't expect was to find the younger generation of the five great sects meeting without me.”

“Forgive us, Xichen-xiong,” said A-Yao with a laugh. “We might have forgotten your invitation.”

Yanli recognized the way her friend’s eyes shone. Ah, that Qingming, did he want to steal all the greatest bachelors of the cultivation world for himself? It was too ambitious even for him.

Her eyes turned to her own fiancé, who stood there awkwardly and didn’t say anything.

Sect Leader Nie approached them. Yanli and Zixuan hurried to greet him but he waved them away. “Mingjue,” he said. “Madam Shen and I are going to retire early. Fill in for me, would you?”

Yanli played with the edge of her sleeve in worry. Did whatever comment Jin Guangshan could have made shake Shizun this badly or did something else happen? Qingming also seemed to worry, craning his neck to find his mother in the crowd.

“Young mistress Jiang,” said Lan Xichen once Sect Leader Nie was gone. “I’ve been meaning to compliment you on your humanitarian efforts. We don’t have as many rivers in Gusu, but we have used your method to help struggling fishermen.”

It felt wonderful to be acknowledged by someone as distinguished as Lan Xichen, and Yanli couldn’t help basking in it.

“Humanitarian efforts?” asked Jin Zixuan. Perhaps he wasn’t completely uninterested in her as a human being… or he wasn’t completely just being polite. Better not get her hopes up.

Yanli was ready for a loveless marriage. She wasn't going to repeat her mother's mistakes and hope for more.

“This winter was harsher than usual and the rivers were completely locked, which got in the way of trade and hurt the villages that depend on fishing,” explained Jiang Yanli.

“You gave the fishermen an advance payment for supplies, so they wouldn’t starve, right?” said Nie Mingjue. “We don’t have this problem in Qinghe as we are used to harsh winters, but it’s good of you to support the common people.”

“We depend on them as much as they depend on us,” said Yanli.

“But what if they don’t give you the supplies you paid for?” asked Jin Zixuan. “They can just say that they don’t have enough to spare.”

“Our sect can survive this loss,” said Yanli. Her mother would be displeased, but even she understood that keeping people from starving was more important than money.

Yanli would have just given them rice, asking for no payment, but she knew that the people of Yunmeng were proud. Only the truly desperate would come forward, and the rest would be left suffering.

“So you’ll just let them rip you off?” asked Jin Zixuan incredulously.

“Young Master Jin, I assure you that the common folk hold cultivators in too much esteem to try to cheat them this way,” said Qingming politely.

“I suppose you’d know,” said Jin Zixuan.

A-Yao was offended, even though his smile didn’t falter. Yanli could see it in the way his eyes narrowed slightly. She had never noticed it before, but Qingming and Jin Zixuan had the same color of eyes, a lighter shade of brown that Yanli found rather beautiful.

“Yue Yao is always the first to assist the common folk during night hunts,” said Nie Mingjue firmly.

Yanli glanced at her fiancé who didn’t seem to know what to say. He looked down and it suddenly hit her that the shape of the eyes was also quite similar. Such a strange coincidence…

She had noticed her Shizun glaring at Jin Guangshan, offended by something he said. It wasn’t exactly unusual, but…

Shizun used to work in a brothel.

Yanli’s mother was vocal about Sect Leader Jin’s proclivities, so Yanli knew that he was fond of the establishments.

Shizun didn’t want A-Yao to know who his father was…

If his father was Jin Guangshan then, of course, she wouldn’t.

If the truth became public, or even if Jin Guangshan and Madam Jin learned the truth, that would cause a rift between the Jiang Sect and the Jin Sect. Not only would her engagement be broken, but her mother’s friendship as well.

And A-Yao… he would try to approach his father, whether to claim his birthright or to take revenge for his mother's suffering. Yanli couldn't see it going well for him.

A-Yao should never know the truth, she decided.

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[1] In traditional Chinese society, widows were expected to dress modestly and avoid bright colors or elaborate hairstyles that might attract attention. By adopting this style, Shen Jiu hopes to become invisible. return to text ↩

[2] "Teacher Shen" (Shěn Nǚ Xiānsheng)

In ancient China, xiānsheng (先生) was a highly respectful title that literally translates to "one who was born earlier" or "one who has lived before." It was used to address people with superior knowledge, experience, or status. That is the word used to address Lan Qiren (I translated it as "Teacher Lan" in the text of the fanfic).

As a form of address, xiānsheng is gendered, so "Nǚ xiānsheng" (女先生) is basically "female teacher," though it was used for any woman of high learning.

By using this form of address, Lan Qiren is basically saying, "I respect you as a fellow professional."

If you are wondering how that compares to "Master Shen" (which is used more commonly in the text, by the way, tell me if this translation is confusing. I can choose a different one), in Chinese it's Shěn Lǎoshī. Literally, Lǎoshī means "old master," hence my choice of translation. This term is more common because while Xiānsheng implies a high level of education in arts and rituals, Lǎoshī can be used for any kind of educator.

return to text ↩

I kind of messed up the pacing of this chapter while I was writing it, so one third of it went to the next chapter. On the bright side, that means that the next chapter will be out way earlier than usual!

Chapter 40: A hand for a hand.

The morning after the feast, they have been directed to a different hall. There was no furniture, just rows of mats and pillows, facing the dais where Wen Ruohan was sitting. This time he didn't make them wait and Shen Jiu could feel the man's eyes on him as he knelt down[1] in the second row.

With the first row reserved for the sect leaders, Shen Jiu was startled when Yu Ziyuan knelt down next to him. She acknowledged his presence with a single nod before saying quietly, "Don't let them make you mad. They'll call you hysterical and write off everything you say."

Shen Jiu snorted, "That's not something I expected to hear from you, Madam Yu."

"That's why I'm the one saying it," she said, her hair ornaments flicking as she turned her head to look ahead. The hall had filled in, and it appeared Wen Ruohan was about to begin the discussion. It struck Shen Jiu that with the room built the way it was all the sect leaders were now kneeling before Wen Ruohan.

Wen Ruohan clapped his hands once, silencing the whispers in the hall immediately. "Let us begin the discussion. Sect Leader Chang has asked me to be the first one to speak. Be lenient. He has been recently injured," said the man, no trace of actual sympathy in his voice.

Chang Ci'an stood up, his shoulders slumped pathetically. The stump was wrapped in silk but everyone could see what was missing. Shen Jiu looked away so he wouldn't glare.

Sect Leader Yao, who sat next to the man, leaned back, his face troubled. "Heavens! What happened to your hand?"

This was not the Sect Leader Yao that Shen Jiu had negotiated with as the old bastard finally retired. Shen Jiu could see why the man didn't want to give his son the Sect Leader position for so long. He was quite a buffoon.

"That is what I have come here to report," Chang Ci'an said, his voice trembling with practiced weakness. "I came, despite my injury. Because the only way for me to find justice is to beg for your empathy."

What a pile of drivel! Shen Jiu couldn't believe that man's shamelessness.

"Get to the point," cut in Wen Ruohan, his voice bored. Something in his voice made the atmosphere in the room drop.

Chang Ci'an rushed to tell his story, almost stumbling over the words. "I was recently invited to the Nie Sect where I was pressed to accept their invasion into our territory…"

"This is plainly a lie!" said Nie Hongyi, incredulously as he stood up. He was shorter than Chang Ci'an but his presence felt stronger. "The negotiation was conducted in good faith. The terms were fair. You agreed to them of your own…"

“Let the man finish.” Wen Ruohan's eyes had narrowed to slits. The command was soft, but it still made a shiver go down Shen Jiu’s spine.

Nie Hongyi sat down. Shen Jiu expected he would have a lot of things to say after this discussion was over. Even from his place he could see the tension in the man’s back.

Chang Ci'an had lost some of his momentum, but he pressed on. “As I was saying, I was pressured. Forced! I had to swallow the offense before the Nie sect's might, knowing that any resistance would mean ruin for my people.”

He paused as if waiting for shouts of righteous indignation. They didn’t come.

“And then… after the mockery of that negotiation, I was ambushed. By the Sect Leader's own advisor! She demanded that I duel her. As if I were some common criminal to be called to account!”

“Isn’t his new advisor a woman?” asked Sect Leader Yao in a loud whisper. Jiang Fengmian confirmed quietly. Shen Jiu had no words for that. He could have sworn he saw Zidian sparkle on his left.

"I indulged her." Chang Ci'an's voice rose, shaking with outrage. "I expected her to fight honorably. That is what one expects from someone associated with the Nie, a fair fight."

He paused, his eyes sweeping the room.

"But not only did Madam Shen use trickery to win. She felt the need to... to cut off my left hand!"

He tore the silk away.

The flesh had healed, but the scar tissue was thick and ugly, puckered around the bone. Chang Ci'an turned left and right as if offering it for inspection.

Gasps echoed through the hall. Sect Leader Yao went pale. Shen Jiu could hear the disciples gasping and whispering behind them.

“Is this a conference or a theater?” asked Nie Mingjue quietly on Shen Jiu’s right.

“An Adjutant Play[2],” said Shen Jiu in response. He could feel people look and point at him across the room. He hated this feeling.

Shen Jiu stood up.

“This one begs permission to explain her actions,” he said modestly. He was going to play this role for as long as possible.

“If you will, Madam,” said Wen Ruohan. Shen Jiu met his eyes by accident and had to keep himself from shuddering. There was something familiar in those eyes, a familiar hunger.

He raised his fan: its red leaves a reminder of his connections in Yunmeng, its silk a shield against all the unwelcome gazes.

“This one does not have much experience attending negotiations,” began Shen Jiu. “This one after all only recently became Sect Leader Nie’s advisor. And yet, even this one can see that the negotiation Sect Leader Chang described was far from damaging. He says he was pressured. He says he was forced. And yet… all he agreed to give was permission. A permission for Nie disciples to spend one month hunting bandits in Yueyang, nothing else."

He paused, lowering his eyes so he could look the Sect Leaders in the eyes.

“If this one is wrong, please explain what it was that made Sect Leader Chang feel pressured.”

He could hear the whispers. Somebody behind him distinctly said “like a fairy” which made Shen Jiu grind his teeth. Even in moments like this…

“I can confirm,” said Jiang Fengmian in a rare demonstration of assertiveness. “That the trade routes in Yueyang had been infested with bandits for quite some time. I was, in fact, planning to speak to Sect Leader Chang about this very issue during this conference.”

“I assure you that Yunmeng Jiang would demand much harsher terms,” added Yu Ziyuan coldly. Chang Ci’an shifted uncomfortably. He clearly didn’t expect Yunmeng to get involved.

Shen Jiu could hear people behind them whisper: “Aren’t those two rivals? I have heard they fought publicly”, “Wasn’t it just a friendly duel?”, “I have seen those two together and they seemed cordial”, “They are even sitting together now.”

He didn’t want to think how many rumors would appear after this conference.

Wen Ruohan tilted his head, amused. “We can discuss this issue after. For now, let us return to the matter at hand. Tell us of this duel, Madam.” His gaze burned Shen Jiu even through the silk shield of his fan. “You do not seem like someone who would seek a fight simply for the pleasure of it.”

“The duel was lawful. Sect Leader Chang accepted it. By the laws of the cultivation world, that should be the end of the matter,” said Shen Jiu softly.

He could hear the whispers in the background. “…lets his hand wander… such a beauty who could blame him…”

Shen Jiu could feel his smile strain at the edges as he continued, “But since the honored sect leaders wish to know more… this one will indulge them.”

He took a deep breath before saying, “More than a year ago, Sect Leader Chang had mutilated a child. A boy of seven, an orphan, who had done nothing wrong except trust that a wealthy man would keep his word. That child is now under this one's care, so it was my responsibility to get him retribution.”

Chang Ci'an's face twisted. “He ran under the wheels of my cart. How am I to blame for that?”

“He ran under the wheels,” Shen Jiu said, his voice rising despite his best efforts, “because you whipped him. Because he was chasing you, begging for the payment you had promised him.”

“It was just a joke,” said Chang Ci’an, his voice defensive. “I didn’t think he would actually expect to be paid. I would indulge him but I was in a hurry.”

Like hell he would! Rotten bastard, who was he trying to fool?

“Your joke almost got the boy killed!” said Shen Jiu as his patience finally snapped.

“He seemed fine when he threatened to kill me,” said Chang Ci’an mockingly. “He even had a sword! I wonder who gave it to him. An unstable woman like you shouldn’t be raising children in the first place. You will just produce more crazed mutts like yourself.”

Shen Jiu felt his blood boil. The crowd whispered around them. How like gentry to bend you to the point of breaking and then judge you when you lash out!

“Mind your words!” barked Nie Hongyi. “Have you forgotten who you’re speaking to?”

Chang Ci’an opened his mouth, but something in Nie Hongyi’s face must have scared him away because he closed it.

“What exactly was the boy’s injury?” asked Wen Ruohan. He sat straighter as if this case truly interested him. Shen Jiu couldn’t think of anything particularly interesting about the whole affair.

“His hand was crushed,” said Shen Jiu flatly.

“Ah, a hand for a hand then,” said Wen Ruohan. He put his head on his hand, as if he was watching a play.

“It seemed to have healed well,” said Chang Ci’an. “He can use it, can’t he?”

“I can speak for Xue Yang’s injury,” said Li Tai, standing up at the far end of the room. He came to the conference to speak with Wen Qing, who was a renowned physician. Shen Jiu hadn’t considered that he could testify. He wondered whether it was a part of the plan.

Wen Ruohan gave a short nod, allowing Li Tai to continue.

“I’m the physician in training so I have seen to the boy’s injury myself. His little finger had been crushed and had to be removed,” said Li Tai, his words more sympathetic than clinical. “His bones and meridians had been damaged severely. If Xue Yang hadn’t received treatment in Baixue Temple he would never be able to cultivate with his left hand, he would also have to deal with chronic pain.”

The tone of the whispers changed. Hurting a talented child was frowned upon.

“Who cares!” said Chang Ci’an. “He still has his hand, hasn’t he?”

“If I knew how much you would yap, I would have cut out your tongue instead,” the words slipped out of Shen Jiu’s mouth, almost out of his control.

He wished he had killed that man when he had an opportunity.

“Look, she is threatening me!” said Chang Ci’an hysterically as he looked around frantically either for threats or support, Shen Jiu wasn’t sure.

A youthful laughter rang through the hall. Shen Jiu was surprised to see that Wen Ruohan was the one laughing.

“A whole hand does seem a bit excessive, doesn’t it?” said Sect Leader Yao, awkwardly. “Wouldn’t it be more fair to cut off a little finger?”

Shen Jiu had enough of these people. “Xue Yang didn’t just lose his finger,” said Shen Jiu not shying away from his bitterness anymore. He couldn’t make things worse at this point. “He almost died of this injury because he couldn’t afford treatment. He also could have died later because this injury would keep him from physical work. For Sect Leader Ci’an, a loss of a hand is just an inconvenience, for a street child it’s a death sentence.”

Shen Jiu met the eyes of Wen Ruohan, who was made out to be a judge of this charade. The man’s eyes were dark and intense, looking for something in Shen Jiu.

Suddenly, he was hit with recognition.

He looked much older and far less pathetic, but… Wen Ruohan had a strong resemblance to Luo Binghe of all people. Yes, his hair was straight and his presence powerful, but the face and more importantly the eyes… Shen Jiu couldn’t unsee it now.

What kind of joke was that?

What could make the author look at Shen Jiu’s pathetic disciple and think “dictator”? Whoever the author was, they were clearly insane.

“How long will this farce go on for?” asked Nie Hongyi, also at the end of his patience. “Why does she even have to explain herself? The duel was legal, so what does it matter whether her revenge was proportionate?”

“Don’t be impatient, my friend,” said Wen Ruohan. The false familiarity made Shen Jiu's skin crawl. “It is true that Madam Shen has done nothing illegal, but we still have to see whether the Nie Sect has overstepped, putting too much pressure on a minor sect.”

Shen Jiu could see that Nie Hongyi was barely keeping himself together.

“Master Shen is rash and over emotional,” said Lan Qiren stiffly. Shen Jiu was going to show him rash and over emotional! “But her actions were legal and her motivation was righteous. I think we should come back to the topic of negotiation proper if we are to look for misconduct.”

Wen Ruohan nodded, “Hongyi, I can see that you are eager to speak. Do tell us more about this negotiation…”

Shen Jiu sat down, feeling drained. Despite the shift of topic, he could still hear people discuss his conduct around him.

“You did fine,” said Yu Ziyuan despite the fact that no one asked her.

Shen Jiu raised his eyebrows at her.

“I would have whipped him,” Yu Ziyuan said instead of the explanation.

Shen Jiu was amused enough by it to get startled out of his sour mood, but as he raised his eyes at Wen Ruohan after hearing the word “whipped”, he was once again reminded of the past long forgotten. Perhaps the System had lied about the author and this was another way to punish him.

There were very few people Shen Jiu would hate to see more.

“Leave the next part to us,” said Nie Mingjue. He must have thought Shen Jiu was worrying about the negotiation.

He and Meng Yao did a stellar job preparing their arguments, though Shen Jiu was, of course, more impressed by his own child. He watched in awe as his son stood there and spoke in a perfectly polite voice: “After we interrogated the merchant, he claimed the bandit who robbed him was wearing Chang Sect robes. Of course, such a thing is impossible. A person would have to be truly shameless to change their disciple robes for a bandit disguise just to gain money.”

Meng Yao looked right at Chang Ci’an as he said the next part. “And, of course, such a thing couldn’t happen without the Sect Leader’s knowledge and approval.”

“Baseless accusations!” shrieked Chang Ci’an.

Meng Yao smiled apologetically, “Oh, I’m not trying to accuse you. I have just been explaining how terribly a victim’s mind can be addled by such a terrible event…”

Shen Jiu was proud of his son.

With the Jiangs and the Lan siding with the Nie, and Wen Ruohan offering no support, the Chang Sect was forced to accept the Nie patrols with no time limit. It seemed too good to be true.

Begrudgingly, Shen Jiu considered it victory until the conference moved to the topic of Wang Sect.

“Sect Leader Wang doesn’t dare complain,” said Sect Leader Ouyang. “But the Wen disciples are seen on their territory more and more often. How are we supposed to understand that?”

“It’s clear, isn’t it?” asked Nie Hongyi. “The Wen Sect seeks to swallow the Wang, and everything we have seen was a preparation to that.”

“Now, now, my friend,” said Wen Ruohan, smiling like a cat who had just killed somebody’s pet bird. “If you can help the Chang Sect by patrolling their land, why cannot my Sect do the same for the Wang? Or are the Nie more righteous than the rest of us?”

That bastard! Shen Jiu had no words.

Neither did Nie Hongyi.

There was nothing they could say to change the fact that the situations were similar on the surface level. They had won the battle but lost the war.

Nie Mingjue couldn’t concentrate well on the competition as he was still seething at what happened during the meeting. He knew Sect Leader Wen had lax morals from his father’s bitter tales, but this… Wen Ruohan had to know that Father had a soft spot for Madam Shen, so he pressed her as a distraction so nobody would notice what he actually wanted.

Now the Nie were complicit in the Wen expansion as they had no moral ground to oppose it. This fact was driving Nie Mingjue mad. He could hear the echo of Baxia’s angry roar in his spine. “Soon,” he promised her silently.

“Shixiong?” asked Yue Yao, touching his arm in the way he often did. “I know what happened is terrible but we have to focus on competition. Now more than ever we need to show that the Nie sect is to be reckoned with.”

Trust Yue Yao to keep a cool head even in a situation like this. Nie Mingjue took a calming breath.

“You are right,” said Nie Mingjue. There was no doubt he could win even with fury pulsing through his whole body, but fighting in this state meant he might accidentally injure someone severely. It would be a bad look after what had happened.

They walked to a Wen official who made them draw lots. By the rules, Nie Mingjue couldn’t fight anyone from his own sect during the preliminary duels, which was a relief. He didn’t want to fight any of his shidi this early and deprive them of a chance to compete.

He dispatched the first Wen disciple easily, then a Lan disciple he vaguely recognized, then another Wen. A Jiang disciple made him work harder - Nie Mingjue actually had to try - but the win came without serious difficulty.

Nie Mingjue didn’t even break a sweat as he stood with sixteen other disciples who won all the preliminary duels. He wasn’t surprised to see Lan Xichen among them. Yue Yao and Nie Xunfeng also won all of their fights, and Nie Mingjue went to praise them for it as their Shixiong.

“I admit that I hope to fight Lan Xichen,” said Yue Yao, his eyes still sparkling from praise. “Shixiong made him sound like a peerless warrior.”

“If you don’t get matched, you can always ask him for a spar. He won’t refuse,” said Nie Mingjue. It was wonderful to see the two of his closest friends get along this well.

“I just hope I don’t get matched with Wen Xu,” said Nie Xunfeng as she attempted to tame a stubborn lock of hair that escaped her ponytail. “Last conference, he slashed my cousin across the face. The scar is still visible. It might take her one more year to get rid of it even with cultivation.”

Nie Mingjue remembered the incident. The Nie women didn’t mind scarring as much as the female cultivators from other sects, but a mark on the face was still a mark on the face. It was just a horribly rude thing to do especially during a conference, where all duels had to be in the spirit of collaboration.

Nie Xunfeng didn’t get matched with Wen Xu, but she did get matched with a Wen. This one seemed to be fighting honorably, so Nie Mingjue didn’t break any limbs when it was his turn to fight the man.

Unlike the preliminary matches, which were fought simultaneously while the older cultivators socialized, the main event drew everyone's attention. The sects loved nothing more than to compare each other's might.

Nie Mingjue watched with interest when it was time for Yue Yao to fight. He had trained with his friend quite often and was eager to see him fight against disciples with different styles and techniques. For Yue Yao, who fought strategically, this had to be a more exciting challenge than what he was used to at the Nie Sect.

The first match Yue Yao had fought wasn’t too interesting as the Wen disciple he was facing was quite straightforward and tried to win by strength alone. Nie Mingjue had seen Yue Yao win this type of fight quite often. Yue Yao’s second opponent, however, was Jin Zixuan, and that had to be interesting.

“I hope this doesn’t get out of hand,” said Xichen as he stood next to Nie Mingjue in the audience.

“Why would it get out of hand?” asked Nie Mingjue. He didn’t think those two liked each other very much, but it took more than that to derail a duel.

“Haven’t you seen? The purple flower,” said Xichen.

Yue Yao really did have a purple flower in his hair, which Nie Mingjue assumed came from Jiang Yanli. The maidens who didn’t participate entertained themselves by throwing flowers at their “favorites” before the competition started. Mingjue admittedly had been too distracted by the small mountain of flowers thrown Xichen’s way to notice anything else.

“Young Mistress Jiang threw a flower at her fiancé, but he let it fall down with the rest,” said Lan Xichen. “Then she threw a flower at Qingming-di and he caught it and put it in his hair.

The whispers were quite loud."

This was stupid and not worth paying attention to. Mingjue however didn't miss the opportunity to tease Xichen, "Isn't gossip against the rules?"

Xichen smiled at him serenely. "How can it be gossip if I'm simply relaying facts? I haven't made any assumptions, did I?"

Mingjue hummed. Xichen could pretend all he wanted, but he loved gossip.

"But I do find myself curious," began Xichen predictably. "Does Qingming-di…"

"They are just friends," said Mingjue, before Xichen could finish the sentence.

He felt bad for Yue Yao and Jiang Yanli, whose friendship was greatly complicated by their gender and social status. He could see that those two truly cared about each other, but the gossip mongers wouldn't care about trivialities like these.

Even if he hadn't learned about the conflict, Nie Mingjue would have noticed the tension. Jin Zixuan was more obvious about it, his moves sloppier in his desperation to defeat his opponent. There was a weight behind his hits, anger in the way he pushed forward thoughtlessly.

Yue Yao's anger was harder to notice, but Nie Mingjue knew how the boy fought. His strategy was more cruel and more personal for it without his usual methods of softening the blow. Usually Yue Yao was the type of accommodating opponent everyone liked to spar with, allowing the fight to continue longer than strictly needed so the opponent wouldn't be humiliated by the quick loss, not using moves that could embarrass, making sure to leave the opponent not only uninjured but being careful of their clothes and hair.

Nie Mingjue had in fact reprimanded him for softness.

Now Yue Yao was almost cruel. Each strike forced Jin Zixuan further back. As the Jin heir grew sloppier, his breathing uneven, Yue Yao maintained the onslaught calmly. He gave Jin Zixuan no room to breathe, not a single moment to regroup.

Even when Yue Yao's Changsheng nicked the end of Jin Zixuan's ponytail[3], an event that usually would make him pause and apologize, he didn't relent, not stopping until his opponent fell on his behind, red with humiliation.

Jin Zixuan wasn't a bad fighter, but whatever had put him out of sorts had predetermined his loss. One needed all faculties to win against such a strong opponent.

Nie Mingjue didn't expect a fight like that from Yue Yao.

Perhaps it was good. He didn't know what was going to come but he had a feeling that they would get more use out of harshness than softness in the future.

Still, when Yue Yao joined him and Xichen in the audience Nie Mingjue couldn't help noting, "That was ruthless. Didn't know you had it in you."

Yue Yao smiled as gently as always, as if he hadn’t made Young Master Jin into a laughing stock a moment ago. “I was a bit harsh, wasn’t I?” he said with a self-deprecating laugh. “I will have to apologize.”

“Young Master Jin did seem to be awfully dismissive towards Young Mistress Jiang,” said Xichen. “It is understandable you would feel the need to get involved.”

“Oh no, I wasn’t trying to get back at him or anything,” said Yue Yao quickly. “I just got lost in the rush of the fight and perhaps I let my irritation bleed in. I apologize for the uncouth display.”

Nie Mingjue hummed. He could understand getting lost in the fight. “That happens,” he said.

It seemed like fate that Nie Mingjue would get to fight Wen Xu next.

He felt the anger at the man's father resurface, and a part of him wanted to use this duel as a statement. He could break a limb or better yet cut up Wen Xu's face so he would have to walk with the shame of it for months.

Madam Shen had the right idea, using the legal duel as a way to get justice. He supposed there was a reason his father chose her as an advisor: she was inventive.

Nie Mingjue met Yue Yao's eyes in the crowd and faltered. No, they didn't need more tension with the Wen right now.

The steel clashed with a satisfying ring. Wen Xu was strong. Even if Nie Mingjue wouldn't use the fight to get revenge, he could still get some satisfaction out of it. He felt Baxia thrum as his anger slowly gave way to excitement.

The two of them weren't the ones for smart maneuvers, choosing to meet head-on and try to outpower each other.

The duel dragged on and Nie Mingjue could feel the satisfaction of being pushed past his limits as he pressed his advantage.

Wen Xu lost on endurance. Too slow to counter Nie Mingjue's slash effectively, he fell to one knee.

Nie Mingjue looked at his father, who gave him a satisfied nod from the audience. His win didn't compensate for the earlier humiliation of the Nie, but it was something.

The only two contestants left were Yue Yao and Xichen. This was the fight Nie Mingjue was eager to see.

The more he got to know Yue Yao, the more he had wanted to introduce him to Xichen. He could tell that they would get along swimmingly, and it appeared from their interactions that he had been correct.

Now, as someone who had fought both of them multiple times, Nie Mingjue wanted to see how well matched they would be.

They began slow, in an almost playful exchange of blows. Yue Yao was quick to turn to his more acrobatic maneuvers, flipping and swirling in a way that often made Mingjue feel dizzy.

Little show off. He wanted to show Xichen what he could do.

Xichen was clearly delighted, his fluid style matching the rhythm Yue Yao had set.

As the fight continued, it gained velocity. Their moves got quicker, punchier. Neither one seemed to fall out of rhythm with the change of speed.

It was a beautiful sight to observe. Mingjue felt disappointed when Xichen finally disarmed Yue Yao, using his superior strength. He could watch those two at it all day and never grow tired.

Yue Yao bowed after sheathing his sword, and Xichen returned the gesture, bowing lower than his status required. Now Nie Mingjue would face Xichen in the final match, a prospect that excited him.

He got to train with Yue Yao regularly, but fighting Xichen would be a rare treat, which Mingjue planned to make the most of. Baxia hummed with joy after being reunited with Shuoyue. A grin spread across his face.

He could feel that Xichen had gotten stronger. His blows had more power behind them, making Mingjue struggle. He couldn't remember the last time his arms trembled as he parried somebody's blow. That Lan arm strength wasn't something to joke about.

Mingjue would still joke about it if they were alone. He would tease Xichen about the handstands the two of them had to do as punishment after Teacher Lan caught them sparring after curfew.

He met eyes with Xichen and by the sparkles of joy he could tell that his friend was remembering the same day.

Nie Mingjue was completely drained by the time he finished the duel, holding Baxia inches away from Xichen's throat. He looked at the audience, wanting to see his father's reaction, but instead he saw Wen Ruohan's sour face.

That served him right. When it came to might, the Wen still couldn't have one over on the Nie and the Lan. Nie Mingjue hoped Wen Ruohan would remember that before making any other questionable moves.

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[1] Kneeling in Ancient Chinese culture doesn't have any demeaning connotations. It was a common way to sit during the formal occasions, despite the fact that chairs were becoming increasingly common among the nobility. However, the fact that Wen Ruohan is sitting above the rest is deeply concerning. return to text ↩

[2] The Adjutant Play, known in Chinese as Canjunxi, was an early form of Chinese comedic drama. The play began as a simple, satirical skit performed by two actors:

Canjun (Adjutant): A corrupt or foolish officer character who is the butt of the jokes.
Canghu (Blue Falcon): A cunning or sharp-tongued character who mocks and insults the Canjun. return to text ↩

[3] In ancient China, hair was considered a sacred gift from parents. However, cutting an opponent's hair in a duel was not a serious offense. It was still considered humiliating, but not something to cause a fuss over.return to text ↩

Chapter 41: The reason why.

The Wen's unique sort of excess was different from what Shen Jiu had seen in places like Huanhua Palace. Less gold and jade, more size and grandeur, with the occasional beast skull displayed as if it were a decorative vase.

Xue Yang and Wei Ying would love it here.

The Wen love of grandeur had produced a truly extensive garden, and Shen Jiu was happy to get lost in it, moving away from the scenic views to a corner that was quiet and empty. A perfect place to relax.

It was the second day of the conference, and Shen Jiu already wanted nothing more than to return home. The intrigues, the people, the seemingly friendly competitions with political undertones… He hated all of this.

A-Yao, however, seemed to thrive in this cesspool of ignorance and mediocrity. Not only was he noticed as "Young Master Nie's capable aide," but Shen Jiu had overheard multiple people praise his son's skills as a cultivator.

Shen Jiu would prefer it if his son didn't attract this much attention while his awful father was here, but he couldn't tell his boy not to be more skilled and powerful than all the rabble. He had raised Meng Yao to have standards for himself.

As if summoned by his thoughts, Jin Guangshan stepped into the garden corner where Shen Jiu had hoped to be left alone. The sight of that smarmy face made him grimace before he could stop himself.

“It took me a moment to recognize you, A-Shi,” he said when he walked close enough. Shen Jiu's shoulders hitched. It was strange to feel threatened by a man who wore a face so like Shang Qinghua's. Shen Jiu used to glare his shidi into submission with embarrassing ease.

“This one hasn’t given Sect Leader Jin permission to address her so familiarly,” said Shen Jiu stiffly.

“You gave me all sorts of permissions,” he said.

Vile. Shen Jiu felt dirty even speaking to this man.

He half-turned to leave. “This one came here to enjoy her solitude. Sect Leader Jin’s presence is inappropriate and unwanted.”

Jin Guangshan stepped into his path, coming too close for Shen Jiu’s taste. “Don't try to fool me, Meng Shi. I admit you disguised yourself well, but I've seen your son.”

He didn't say "our son." Shen Jiu's jaw tightened. He was glad - Jin Guangshan made no claim to A-Yao - and furious. How could he not want someone as perfect as A-Yao to be his

son? Especially considering that the man's heir was less than impressive.

Shen Jiu didn't say any of that.

"Meng Shi is dead," he said instead.

It was the truth. He had never said it aloud before.

"I assumed as much, after the fire," said Jin Guangshan. "I should have expected you'd use it to disappear. You have always been smart."

"What do you want? You and I have nothing connecting us, and I want it to remain that way."

If Jin Guangshan had taken the time to follow him, there was something he wanted.

Jin Guangshan appeared surprised. "Last time we talked, there were many things you wanted from me."

"As I've said, that woman is dead. All I want from you is to forget that my son and I exist. It didn't seem difficult for you before. I assume you'll manage."

"So am I to believe that your presence here isn't some kind of ploy to gain my attention?" asked Jin Guangshan incredulously.

"The world doesn't revolve around you," said Shen Jiu. "I have better things to occupy my mind with."

"Are you planning to become Madam Nie?" asked Jin Guangshan, his words mocking. "That's how it started with us, though you advised me in a less official capacity."

"What I'm planning doesn't concern you," said Shen Jiu.

The last thing Jin Guangshan said scraped at his brain. Co-conspirator. The System's word came to his mind.

"Remembering the past doesn't seem to be in either of our interests," said Shen Jiu. Let the bastard make of that what he would.

"You are the one who killed him." Jin Guangshan's voice dropped. "Nobody will believe you if you accuse me." A flicker of fear crossed his face, reminding Shen Jiu of his ever-nervous shidi.

What the hell did you do, Meng Shi?

"I wasn't going to say anything, and I won't… if you leave us alone." Whatever Meng Shi had done, it was clearly the reason Jin Guangshan had sought him out.

"Don't be like that, A-Shi," Jin Guangshan cooed. "Didn't we have fun? You look even better than I remember. Cultivation has done you wonders. Did anyone teach you how to dual cultivate? I could…"

The smell of Jin Guangshan's perfume almost made Shen Jiu gag.

Shen Jiu stepped back, his hand jumping to the hilt of Xiu Ya. "Insinuate something like that again and you will find yourself without manhood."

Jin Guangshan paused. At least he seemed to take the threat seriously.

"I just thought that if we didn't know each other, we could get acquainted. Wouldn't it be good for inter-sect relations?" Jin Guangshan's smile was oily as he reached his hand as if to touch Shen Jiu's neck.

That was it. Shen Jiu was going to stab him. Consequences be damned.

"Sect Leader Jin," said Lan Qiren coolly. Shen Jiu had been so focused on the threat that he hadn't noticed the man approach. His light robes made him look ghostly in the twilight. "Allow me to borrow Teacher Shen. There is something we need to discuss."

Jin Guangshan stepped back. "Of course," he said, recovering his composure. "We were just finishing."

Shen Jiu glared at that awful man's back as he left, his grip on Xiu Ya's hilt only loosening once Jin Guangshan had disappeared around the corner.

"It is unwise for Teacher Shen to go on walks alone," said Lan Qiren, his hands behind his back. The gesture reminded Shen Jiu of being scolded by his Shizun back when he was a disciple. She often called him unwise, yet she still chose him as her successor.

"I can manage fine," snapped Shen Jiu, reflexively.

"Next time there might not be someone to rescue you," said Lan Qiren.

"The one you saved is Jin Guangshan," huffed Shen Jiu. "If it weren't for you, he would have walked away with his guts cut open."

Lan Qiren's eyebrows rose. "Would you truly act this violently towards a Sect Leader at a conference that promotes peace?" He paused, and made his tone slightly less judgemental. "While your anger is justified, this would be disastrous for both you and your sect."

Shen Jiu had nothing to say to that so he picked at the words. "Peace?" he said mockingly. "The only thing this conference promotes is Wen expansion. We are all just too afraid to say it out loud."

Lan Qiren frowned. "Rushing to uphold justice, without restraint or consideration, may cause more harm than good."

"Closing your eyes to wrongdoing does not make the wrong disappear," said Shen Jiu.

It had been some time since he had debated a man of knowledge. Discussing politics with Nie Hongyi involved less philosophy and more swearing.

“Taking time to think is not the same as ignoring. It is the wisdom of knowing that a wrong poorly corrected becomes two wrongs,” said Lan Qiren.

“You had plenty of time to think. Have you come to any conclusions?” asked Shen Jiu, pointedly.

“Perhaps that is something we could discuss over tea. I will inform Sect Leader Nie that I accept his invitation,” said Lan Qiren stiffly. “It would be prudent of you to attend.”

He had used Lan Qiren to get rid of the irritation caused by Jin Guangshan, so he didn’t expect the man to want more of his company.

“If my schedule allows it, I will let you know,” said Shen Jiu, echoing the very words Lan Qiren had used to dismiss Nie Hongyi days before. Let the man have a taste of his own medicine.

Lan Qiren nodded seriously. “Allow me to walk you to your room,” he said. Shen Jiu was too tired to argue. Lan Qiren was a stiff and annoying man, but he at least wasn't a threat.

They walked together back to the guest quarters, not exchanging another word. Shen Jiu didn't feel the need to fill the silence, and neither, it seemed, did Lan Qiren. They nodded at each other before parting.

Shen Jiu closed the door behind him and stood in the empty room. Before he could fully relax, a grating voice cut through the silence.

[User had collected 2003 Lore Points. Purchase "The reason why Qi Ge didn't come for me" now?]

Shen Jiu narrowed his eyes. The System never offered it like that before.

“Didn’t I mute you?” he asked in his mind. “Why are you making noise all of a sudden?”

[This is urgent information. The offer will expire today.]

“What?” asked Shen Jiu incredulously. “Why would it expire?”

[It’s a limited offer.]

He knew it was lying to him. It wanted him to learn the truth now for some reason. He knew he shouldn’t agree to play along, but…

“You have not mentioned it being limited before,” said Shen Jiu stubbornly.

[Apologies. You may have an additional question answered as compensation.]

“I don’t want to think about it here,” thought Shen Jiu. “There are too many enemies around. I need to keep my wits.”

[If User doesn’t purchase the truth today, the offer will expire.]

Shen Jiu grit his teeth. “Fine. I purchase it, you damn crook.”

[Yue Qi, later known as Yue Qingyuan, failed to keep his promise to User because he was too late.]

Shen Jiu froze, uncomprehending, his hand unconsciously grabbing at his sleeves. “How could he be too late?”

If he was too late, why didn’t he just say so?

[As Yue Qi rushed to save User, he experienced a qi deviation.]

[Desperate to survive, he bonded his very life force with the sword that had rejected him.]

[His Shizun chose to break him and forge him anew, locking Yue Qi in seclusion for a year to heal.]

That couldn't be. Shen Jiu tried to remember all the times he had seen Yue Qi and the former Sect Leader together. Yue Qi had never seemed to like the man… but wouldn't he have said something? Wouldn't he have... No. Of course he wouldn't.

He always had to do every damn thing by himself. Asking for help wouldn’t even occur to him. And even Shen Jiu struggled to see what was hiding behind his placating smile.

Just like A-Yao. It had to be fate that Shen Jiu gave the boy the surname Yue. These two were too alike.

[By the time Yue Qi reached the Qiu manor, it had already burned down.]

Shen Jiu lowered himself to sit on the ground as his legs grew weak. The last sentence was the final nail in the coffin.

He should have guessed.

Of course Yue Qi was innocent. Of course Shen Jiu had to think the worst of him, his rotten nature on full display. Of course he had wished death on the person who had ruined his own body and cultivation to save him. Of course Yue Qi would break himself over scum like him.

That idiot! Always so impulsive, never thinking, he just had to…

Was that why he hadn’t told him? Did he think Shen Jiu would still blame him? If he thought so badly of him why did he even bother coming? He should have just forgotten about him. All Shen Jiu ever did was bring him trouble.

But really why the fuck hadn’t he told him? Did the seclusion damage his brain or was he some kind of masochist enjoying Shen Jiu throwing vitriol his way? Shit-for-brain idiot, he wasted so many years they could have spent together!

Why couldn’t he trust him? Was it Shen Jiu’s fault? Did he do something wrong? Did Yue Qi not trust him after seeing him over the bodies of his fellow disciples, consorting with a

demonic cultivator?

Well, fuck him then! Didn't Shen Jiu prove his loyalty when he killed Wu Yanzi?

Even now he jumped to blaming Yue Qi for it all. He really was the worst.

Shen Jiu's nails, unconsciously strengthened by cultivation, left deep ridges in the floor as he clutched at it furiously.

Why did Yue Qi even tolerate him and his bitterness, when he knew he didn't deserve it? Did he hate Shen Jiu for it? Did he grow resentful?

"I have one more question, right?" asked Shen Jiu out loud.

[Yes.]

"What did Yue Qingyuan feel for me by the end of it?"

[Yue Qingyuan was in love with User. That never changed.]

In love? How could he be in love with such a hateful, despicable person? It had to be his face. It had always been about his face.

Loud, rough, and painful laughter burst out of Shen Jiu, making his frame shake as he clutched at his arms. It sounded more like a cough or a dog bark than any expression of joy.

So even Yue Qi fell victim to his cursed charms, huh?

He should have cut up his face when he had been young. He had certainly wanted to. So what if he would end up beaten to death? It would still be better than this constant…

The door opened, startling Shen Jiu out of his laughing fit. What was Nie Hongyi doing here?

"Lan Qiren said you had an unpleasant encounter in the garden," said Nie Hongyi. "I wanted to check whether you are alright."

Always so attentive… Was it also about his face with him? Different body, same curse. Shen Jiu could never escape it.

"Sleep with me," he said. If Nie Hongyi was nice enough not to take what wasn't offered, he could have a reward.

Nie Hongyi crouched, grabbing his wrist. "Did you drink anything strange? Touch any artefacts? No, your meridians seem fine…"

"Don't you want me?" asked Shen Jiu, tearing his wrist out of the man's grip. "I'm offering."

Nie Hongyi sighed. "I can tell when a woman wants me, Shen-mei. That's not it. You're trembling." Was he? He hadn't noticed. "Was it something that awful man said to you?"

“Why do you care if I want you or not?” asked Shen Jiu stubbornly. Yue Qingyuan would have cared. Or he would have, if…

Nie Hongyi sat down on the floor in front of Shen Jiu, crossing his legs. “Sex is only fun if both parties want it. Now tell me, do I have to kill Jin Guangshan?”

Would it be different with Yue Qi then? Shen Jiu would never know. Yue Qingyuan was now farther from him than ever before.

His vision blurred. Shen Jiu covered his face as ugly, wailing sobs began to break out of him. What was happening to him? He hadn’t cried like that in decades.

“Shen-mei?” asked Nie Hongyi, concerned. “I was joking about killing Jin Guangshan but I can get away with beating him up.”

Shen Jiu shook his head. He was crying so hard the words refused to form in his mouth. He tried to stop but couldn’t.

Nie Hongyi put a cautious hand on his back. Shen Jiu remembered being small and having too much hurt inside and Qi-ge was always there, he wasn’t there, he would never be there…

Shen Jiu threw himself into Nie Hongyi's chest, clutching at his robes as he shook with sobs. Now there were two hands on his back, patting him like he was some kind of furry animal.

"It will be alright," said Nie Hongyi quietly. That, of course, was always a lie, but this time Shen Jiu believed it.

They had been like that for a long time: Nie Hongyi mumbling calming nonsense while Shen Jiu slowly got his body back under his control. Once the sobs had quietened down, he extracted himself from the embrace, rubbing at his eyes and not daring to look at Nie Hongyi. This was truly embarrassing.

“Is a man like Jin Guangshan really worth your tears?” asked Nie Hongyi, his voice serious.

“It’s not about him,” said Shen Jiu. He didn’t want anyone to think that he broke down because of that pile of vomit. “I learned something distressing, that’s all.”

This was, of course, an understatement.

“Something I can help with?” Nie Hongyi asked. He really was rather sweet… for a man.

Shen Jiu shook his head. “There’s no fixing it.”

Even if he could go back to his old body, he wouldn’t leave his children behind. So Yue Qingyuan would always remain out of reach.

“Do you want me to call for your son?” asked Nie Hongyi.

“No,” said Shen Jiu. He didn’t want A-Yao to see him like this. “I should just sleep.”

Strangely enough, he did feel like sleeping for a change, his head heavy and cotton-like after all the liquid that had leaked out of it. If he had known tears would be this helpful for insomnia, he would have cried more often.

“Then I will get out of your hair,” said Nie Hongyi cautiously. “But if you need anything…”

“If this is your response to tears, that explains how Huaisang grew up to be such a crybaby,” said Shen Jiu half-heartedly.

It seemed to work as Nie Hongyi grinned, tension leaving his shoulders. “Mingjue is much worse than me about his tears.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Shen Jiu flatly.

After that Nie Hongyi finally left. Despite the heavy weight of his thoughts, Shen Jiu’s sleep was dreamless that night.

Meng Yao hadn't expected the Wen Sect to choose regular hunting as a test of skill. He supposed it would check stealth, archery, and tracking, but there was something almost disappointingly mundane about it.

Lan Xichen's face assumed an expression dangerously close to a frown as he heard the announcement.

“You don’t have to participate,” said Nie Mingjue, giving the Wen announcer a reproachful look. “They should take into account that some people…”

“It’s not a problem. The others shouldn’t be troubled because of my sect’s beliefs,” said Lan Xichen.

Meng Yao remembered that the Lan were vegetarians so they likely took issue with killing animals for sport. He had to use this to his advantage. If Lan Xichen couldn’t go with them, that just gave Meng Yao more time with Nie Mingjue.

Then Meng Yao’s own mouth betrayed him, “You could still keep us company. You don’t have to use your bow if you don’t want to.”

What was he doing? It was idiotic.

Lan Xichen smiled at him, and Meng Yao felt his brain turn to mush. He had lost the battle with himself.

“Wouldn’t I distract you?” asked Lan Xichen.

“You would entertain us,” said Nie Mingjue. “You can’t imagine how boring regular hunting is. It’s just a lot of stalking and standing still, and the kill is hardly satisfying.”

“So I would be the entertainment?” asked Lan Xichen teasingly. “Should I play you an encouraging melody then?”

“That’s just a sure way to scare away the prey,” said Nie Mingjue. It was amusing how seriously he took things sometimes. Meng Yao caught himself exchanging amused looks with Lan Xichen.

It felt strangely nice to have Lan Xichen with them.

Nie Mingjue was great in many ways, but conversation wasn't his forte. When they were alone, Meng Yao either had to carry most of the conversation himself or find something practical to speak about. They had spent more time discussing sect matters than anything personal, which was rather disheartening.

Lan Xichen, however, was great at casual conversation, and, more importantly, he knew how to engage Nie Mingjue, perhaps even better than Meng Yao himself. He ought to have been bitter about it, but… Lan Xichen could have easily excluded him, making Meng Yao fight for attention. He did the opposite.

“You should come to our lectures, Qingming-di,” said Lan Xichen as they walked through the thick of the forest. “We are to open our doors to disciples from other sects in a year's time. I could put in a word with my uncle.”

The invitation sounded purely genuine. It would separate Meng Yao from Nie Mingjue for a long period of time, but for some reason he didn’t think it was the intention behind it.

“Don’t listen to him, Yue Yao,” said Nie Mingjue. “He will make it sound exciting and then you will sign up for half a year of eating vegetables and going to sleep at nine.”

Meng Yao liked to think that Nie Mingjue didn’t want him to leave and that was why he was saying that.

“Nine?” he asked incredulously. “But when are you supposed to get any of the work done?”

He had done enough paperwork by candlelight that it would have ruined his eyesight if it wasn’t for cultivation.

“See,” said Nie Mingjue, pointing at Meng Yao as if proving a point. “Yue Yao is the most reasonable person I know and even he thinks it’s ridiculous.”

Meng Yao felt warm and light, like his golden core had grown stronger. It was a ridiculous comparison, but he didn't know another way to describe it.

Lan Xichen smiled, “We wake up at five, so you can do everything in the morning. Isn’t it more convenient to work while the sun is up?”

Meng Yao imagined waking up this early and shuddered. He could push through the whole night working if he needed to, but waking up at five every day sounded like a new way of torture.

“And don’t get me started on the punishment,” said Nie Mingjue as if he had heard Meng Yao’s thoughts. “I have been forced to do handstands so many times… Once Teacher Lan made me do a handstand and write the rules at the same time.”

“This is unusual,” said Meng Yao. He had never been punished in his life and he planned to keep it that way.

“It’s very good for arm strength,” said Lan Xichen, sparkles of laughter in his beautiful eyes. “I can lift even Mingjue-xiong over my shoulder without using cultivation.”

“I don’t believe you,” said Meng Yao teasingly. He wondered whether it was something they had tested.

“It’s true!” said Lan Xichen, his voice full of laughter. “Mingjue-xiong, come here.”

“Don’t you even think of it…” began Nie Mingjue as he stepped away from Lan Xichen. He wasn’t fast enough, as his friend grabbed him by the waist and lifted. “Xichen! I’ve told you not to do that.”

Look at that. He really could do that. Meng Yao was impressed.

“Sorry, Mingjue-xiong, you’re just a very convenient weight to lift,” said Lan Xichen, laughing. “Better than any stones we use at Cloud Recesses.”

Meng Yao covered his mouth with his sleeve as he laughed. Nie Mingjue's face was so funny as he hung over Lan Xichen's shoulder, his mighty legs dangling. He didn't notice in time.

Nie Mingjue reached out and grabbed him by the waist. “Let’s see how you like it, you little…” he began.

“Mingjue-xiong, don’t!” gasped Lan Xichen, but it was too late.

Meng Yao didn't weigh much, but his weight was enough to unbalance Lan Xichen and send all three of them falling in a heap. Meng Yao landed on his side. His cultivation kept him from injury, but the impact still kicked the air out of his lungs.

The way he was lying gave him a good view of Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen untangling themselves. He noticed Nie Mingjue's eyes linger on Lan Xichen's face before he pushed himself off the ground. He should have felt bitter about it, but then Lan Xichen looked Meng Yao in the eyes and smiled in a way that made his heart stutter.

“Sorry,” said Nie Mingjue awkwardly as he gave Meng Yao a hand, helping him up. “I didn't think it through.”

He helped Lan Xichen next, who said, “I'm not experienced in hunting, but I suspect this much noise wasn't ideal?”

They had to change their chosen hunting spot entirely. Without a doubt, they had scared away all the prey in the area. Winning seemed unlikely now, but returning empty-handed would be embarrassing.

After scouting for a while, Nie Mingjue found a deer trail, and they tracked it carefully, making sure their footsteps were silent. Soon they found the animal, its hide golden-brown and quite beautiful. It was grazing, giving them a perfect opportunity for a clean shot.

Nie Mingjue gestured for Meng Yao to take out his bow. Of the two of them, Meng Yao was by far the better shot - Nie Mingjue rarely bothered with archery practice. Meng Yao glanced at Lan Xichen's face and saw the frown marring it. For someone like him, hunting this way must have looked like unnecessary cruelty.

Meng Yao had a more practical view of it. He had done his own share of hunting, and at times it had been his only way to provide food for his family. Even when he hunted socially, as a way to bond with other disciples, he saw nothing wrong with it, as long as the death wasn't wasted.

Despite all that it suddenly felt too cruel to kill the animal, and Meng Yao faltered. If he missed the shot he was sure that Nie Mingjue wouldn't blame him. Perhaps he could…

An arrow flew past his shoulder, striking the deer in the eye and killing it instantly. As the deer fell, Meng Yao turned to see two Jin cultivators approaching. He recognized Jin Zixuan immediately, who had clearly taken the shot. His companion was Jin Zixun, his cousin of no particular talent.

"It's in bad taste to steal another man's kill," said Nie Mingjue as he glared at the Jin.

From the constipated look on Jin Zixuan's face, Meng Yao could tell he was embarrassed. It was possible he hadn't noticed them as they had approached the deer from different sides. His cousin, however, appeared to have no shame whatsoever.

"It's in bad taste to steal another man's fiancée, too," Jin Zixun said.

"I'm sure they didn't see us, Shixiong," began Meng Yao, trying to defuse the situation. He had been a tad… emotional during his duel with Jin Zixuan, and now he was afraid things could escalate into something truly troublesome.

"And now he is all demure," said Jin Zixun in too loud a whisper. "Even though he still has your fiancée's flower in his hair."

Jin Zixuan looked aside, not saying anything, but Meng Yao could have sworn he was pouting. What a child! And to think the two of them were the exact same age.

He would not allow those two to make him regret accepting Yanli's gift, but now he felt the need to soften the situation.

"Jiang Yanli is a precious friend," said Meng Yao firmly. "But neither she nor I hold any romantic feelings toward each other. The flower was a gesture of support, nothing more."

Jin Zixuan seemed to brighten almost imperceptibly, but his cousin refused to shut up.

"Why would you befriend such a dull girl unless you wanted to seduce her?" Jin Zixun asked. "You're just another social climber!"

Cold fury flashed through Meng Yao. Not at Zixun, who was nothing more than a loud-mouthed buffoon, spouting whatever idiotic thoughts came into his head. No, his anger was for Jin Zixuan, who said nothing to protect his fiancée. Either he shared his narrow-minded

cousin's opinion, or he lacked the spine to contradict him. Both options made Meng Yao truly angry.

“Yanli is one of the smartest, most empathetic people I know,” said Meng Yao, his voice tight with fury. “She is kind and generous, the kind of loyal, understanding friend anyone would be lucky to have. If Young Master Jin doesn't see that, well… I think Jiang Yanli should be the one asking whether a man who allows her to be badmouthed behind her back was worthy of her flower.”

He hadn't thought through any of those words, and now he felt lightheaded after the outburst. Jin Zixun drew his sword.

Nie Mingjue stepped forward to stand at Meng Yao's shoulder. It was clear he was aching for a fight. Jin Zixun must have realized that he and his cousin were outnumbered, because he faltered.

“Zixun, put away your sword,” said Jin Zixuan. He didn’t dare to look Meng Yao in the eyes as he said it. “I apologize… for stealing your kill. You can have it.”

How would someone like that lead a whole sect in the future? It was unfair that people like Jin Zixuan were handed unimaginable power they didn't know what to do with, while Meng Yao had to achieve whatever little influence he had through hard work and mild scheming.

“I don’t need your prey,” said Meng Yao. “Have it.”

Nie Mingjue and Lan Xichen followed him away, no questions asked.

“Those entitled assholes,” grumbled Nie Mingjue as they went far enough not to be overheard. “I don’t know how you do that… speaking all eloquently without punching anybody in the face.”

Meng Yao smiled at the image. “He is still Yanli’s fiancé. I wouldn’t want to make any more trouble for her.”

If she wanted to marry him, he wouldn’t stand in her way. No matter if he considered Jin Zixuan unworthy.

“You’re a good friend,” said Lan Xichen warmly. “Young Mistress Jiang is lucky to have such a fierce protector.”

Meng Yao looked aside, touched and slightly embarrassed. He hadn't meant to say quite as much as he had. Well, perhaps his words would at least make Jin Zixuan think about his behavior. Meng Yao doubted it, but he could hope.

“Let's find something big,” he said, changing the subject. “I've read that there are boars living in the forests of Qishan.”

“Want to show up those Jin?” asked Nie Mingjue with slight amusement.

“Shouldn’t we bring honor to the Nie sect?” asked Meng Yao innocently.

Nie Mingjue nodded seriously, while Lan Xichen flashed Meng Yao a teasing smile. He was not quite so easy to fool. It was rather exciting.

Perhaps he wanted to show up the Jin just a little bit, but he wasn’t going to confess it.

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